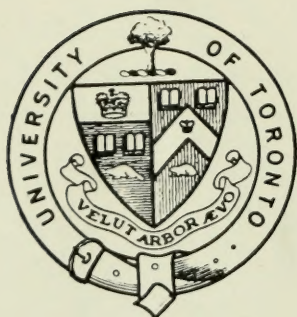


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QUEEN MARGOT PART I THE GREAT MASSACRE



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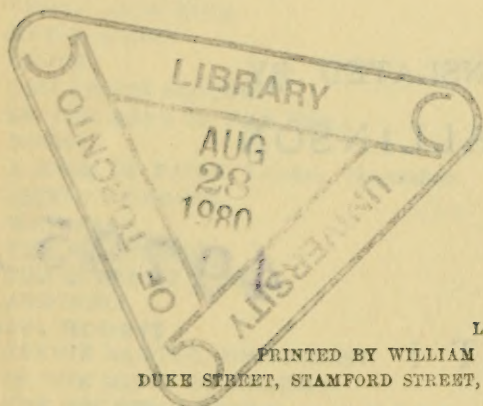
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PART I
THE GREAT MASSACRE

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INTRODUCTION

DUMAS, who invented so much, claims to have invented the *roman-feuilleton*. This he did as early in his career as 1836. The occasion was the founding of the journal *la Presse*, his contribution to it being the historical romance *La Comtesse de Salisbury*. The other papers quickly adopted this plan of publishing novels in instalments, and by 1843, when Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* was appearing in the *Journal des Débats*, the popularity of the system had become immense.

Then commenced a great struggle among the rival editors, a struggle which resulted in all the leading novelists being pressed into the service of the *feuilleton*. Dumas wrote *The Musketeers*, *Monte-Cristo*, and several other romances simultaneously.

On December 3rd, 1844, *la Presse*, which was owned by Émile de Girardin, published the first chapter of Balzac's novel, *The Peasants*. To it was prefixed a dedication, which contained this sentence: "During eight years I have a hundred times quitted, a hundred times resumed this book, the most important of those I have resolved to write."

Three days later the following announcement was inserted: "*La Presse* commenced on Tuesday, December 3rd, the publication of *The Peasants*, scenes of country life by M. de Balzac. In the course of the month, and immediately after the first part of *The Peasants*, *la Presse* will publish *la Reine Margot*, by M. Alexandre Dumas."

The Peasants, in fact, far from being read with interest, had brought to the editor's letter-box expressions of disapproval, nay, even threats to drop subscriptions. And Girardin, afraid to face the dreaded December 31st, on which day, it must be observed, subscriptions for the ensuing year fell due, had had to promise a romance by the author of *Monte-Cristo*, and not only this, but to publish before the close of the year the first chapter, breaking his contract with Balzac by so doing.

The first instalment of *la Reine Margot* duly appeared on Christmas Day, and the bored readers of *The Peasants*, which had stopped a few days before, seized the paper with joy and renewed their subscriptions.

Émile de Girardin was saved, but Balzac was humiliated, and a crowd of little men immediately attacked him, ridiculing *The Peasants* and the fifty characters already introduced. Dumas, who possessed a most generous heart, must have been greatly disturbed by all this, but he had sold the serial rights and was powerless to interfere. Balzac was no admirer of Dumas' work, and at times spoke of it contemptuously, the fact being that, in Balzac's eyes, its enormous popularity was its defect. One day, the two authors having met at an evening party given by Madame de Girardin, Balzac, when leaving, said as he passed Dumas, "When I can do nothing else, I shall write some plays." "Begin at once then," promptly said the popular dramatist, and no reply occurring to Balzac, he straightway departed. After Balzac's death Dumas never wrote of him but in the highest terms, though he rather naïvely confessed that he was unable to appreciate all the *Comédie Humaine*, as Balzac called his complete works.

Was Balzac too angry with Girardin to read *la Presse*? No; we feel that great was his curiosity to see what "the Negro," as he called Dumas, would make of the sixteenth century, of Catherine de Medicis and Charles IX., of Queen Margot and Henri of Navarre. Dumas had been happy in inventing his Count of Monte-Cristo, extraordinarily fortunate in coming across Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan in a forgotten book of memoirs—such luck could not last, the tale of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew was a thrice-told one, his heroine, Margot, was the best-known of any queen, for had not stories innumerable been written of and round about her? "What would Dumas be able to do?" Balzac must have asked himself as he read the announcements.

It was soon seen that Dumas had been fortunate once again. He had found

in the Memoirs of the time two men whose tragic history, alluded to rather than related, strangely attracted him. The Wizard of the South read all that he or Maquet could find concerning these, and then, closing his books, allowed his imagination to lead him where it pleased. Presently he had ceased to live in the nineteenth century. It was August 18th, 1572, the night of the marriage of Marguerite de Valois and Henri of Navarre; the clock of Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois has struck midnight, the crowd is surging about the streets adjacent to the brilliantly-lighted Louvre, and with the crowd Dumas imagines himself moving. To Dumas the illusion is perfect, and when he takes his pen he immediately communicates it to the reader. The opening chapters are quickly written, and as quickly is the reader placed in possession of all the history he need know to enjoy the breathless story that follows.

Presently Dumas is not content to be a mere witness of what passes; he becomes one or even two of the chief characters, and henceforward it is not a story that he is telling, but his own adventures—all the characters are real men and women whom he jests with, quarrels with, loves, admires, execrates, despises, or kills. He knows them all perfectly, he has assimilated all knowledge necessary for his purpose, he rehearses every scene before he puts it on paper, but once there he changes nothing, and nothing stops him until he reaches the word "Finis."

Émile de Girardin was not only saved but enriched. *Queen Margot* was read by every one in *la Presse*, and before the concluding chapter was reached it was, by universal consent, considered one of the best of historical romances. It was seen to be better constructed than *The Three Musketeers*, and, on the whole, better written, but it was not found to possess the irresistible charm of that immortal book. Difficult as it is to lay aside *Queen Margot* on a first reading, the gentle reader, when his eye falls upon it among a number of Dumas' books on a subsequent occasion, may find his recollection of rivers of blood, torture-chambers, poisons, fierce hates and as fierce loves, too strong; he may choose one of the others. The force with which Dumas grips his reader is in fact tremendous; that he never relaxes it, is at once the cause of his success and of his comparative failure to charm. Nearly every other of our author's most popular books contains a chapter or two which, although necessary to the story, seem to have been developed beyond its actual needs. Every one remembers the visit of the Count of Monte-Cristo to the worker of the telegraph. The exigencies of the plot required the visit to be made, but much of the delicious description of the garden, the dormice, and the peaches is embroidery. One feels that Dumas allowed his imagination the refreshment of resting in that garden, and one rests there too and is thankful. But in *Queen Margot* there can be no rest for author or reader—the time was a terrible one, and terrible it must be made; as it was experienced by la Mole and Coconnas, so must it be experienced by the reader.

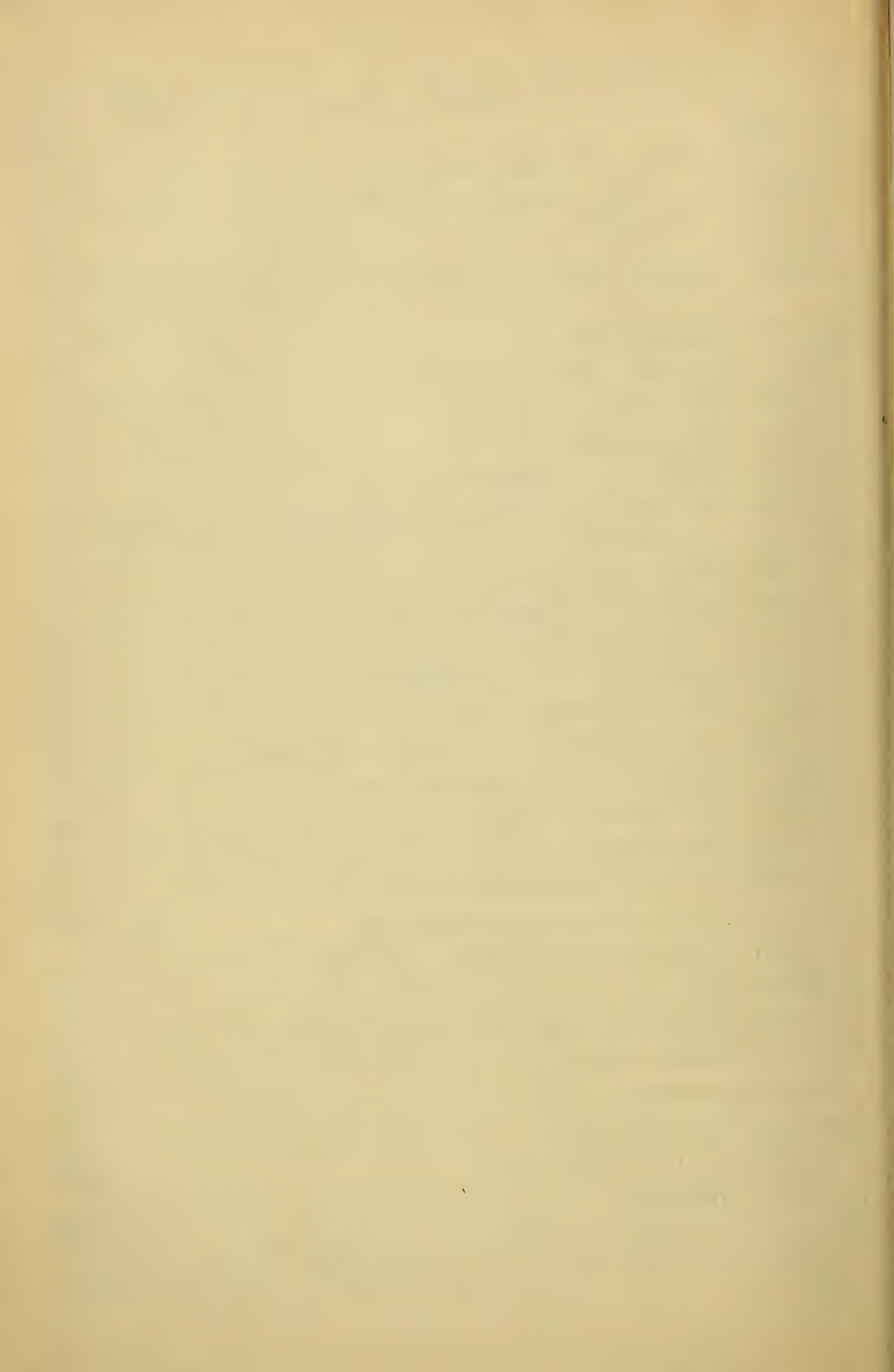
La Mole and Coconnas! Those were the names of the two men which Dumas found written in history, and of which he made two heroes after his own kind of heroes. Had he not discovered them, he would still have written an excellent romance, but with two such men to mould and fashion in his own image he becomes immense, titanic. It is the superhuman, elemental force that Dumas possesses, when genuinely inspired, that places him above all other romancers and makes D. G. Rossetti call him "the one great and supreme man, the sole descendant of Shakespeare." High praise this for Balzac's "Negro"!

And *The Peasants*—what of it? Alas! Balzac, though he worked further upon it at various times, never completed it. After his death his widow did her best to piece together many fragments, and *The Peasants*, as it exists to-day, is her work as well as his.

La Reine Margot was published in 1845 by Garnier frères (Paris) in six volumes. Subsequently Dumas and Maquet dramatised the romance, and the play was produced at the Théâtre Historique on February 10th, 1847. After the second part of *Queen Margot*, we shall publish *The Lady of Monsoreau*, in which many of the characters of the former story reappear.

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I THE DUC DE GUISE'S LATIN	1
II THE QUEEN OF NAVARRE'S BEDCHAMBER	3
III A POET KING	14
IV THE EVENING OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF AUGUST, 1572	20
V OF VIRTUE IN GENERAL AND OF THE LOUVRE IN PARTICULAR	24
VI THE DEBT PAID	29
VII THE NIGHT OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF AUGUST, 1572	34
VIII THE VICTIMS	41
IX THE ASSASSINS	47
X DEATH, MASS, OR BASTILLE	54
XI THE MIRACULOUS HAWTHORN IN THE CEMETERY OF THE HOLY INNOCENTS	60
XII MUTUAL CONFIDENCES	66
XIII KEYS MAY SOMETIMES OPEN DOORS FOR WHICH THEY WERE NEVER INTENDED	70
XIV SECOND NIGHT AFTER THE WEDDING	75
XV WHAT WOMAN WILLS, GOD WILLS	79
XVI A DEAD ENEMY HAS AYE A PLEASANT SAVOUR	86
XVII A RIVAL TO MASTER AMBROISE PARE	92
XVIII RESURRECTION	96
XIX MASTER RENE, PERFUMER TO THE QUEEN-MOTHER	101
XX THE TWO BLACK HENS	107
XXI IN MADAME DE SAUVE'S APARTMENTS	110
XXII "SIRE, YOU WILL BE KING"	115
XXIII A CONVERT	117
XXIV THE RUE TIZON AND THE RUE CLOCHEPERCEE	124
XXV THE RED CLOAK	129
XXVI MARGARITA	134
XXVII THE HAND OF GOD	137
XXVIII THE LETTER FROM ROME	140
XXIX HARKAWAY!	143
XXX MAUREVEL	146
XXXI THE BOAR HUNT	148



QUEEN MARGOT

CHAPTER I

THE DUC DE GUISE'S LATIN

ON Monday, the 18th of August, 1572, there were great doings at the Louvre; the windows of the ancient Royal Palace, usually so gloomy, were brilliantly illuminated; the neighbouring squares and streets, generally so deserted so soon as the clock of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois had struck nine, were this evening thronged with people, although it was now midnight. This menacing, pushing, clamorous crowd resembled some dark and angry sea with its roaring waves; this surging tide of humanity pouring out over the quay and overflowing the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain and the Rue de l'Astruce, beat against the walls of the Louvre and ebbed back against the base of the Hôtel de Bourbon, which rose opposite to the Palace. In spite of the Royal fête, or, rather, perhaps because of it, the attitude of the populace was somewhat threatening, since it did not suspect that this solemnity, at which it was acting the part of an uninvited spectator, was but the prelude to another entertainment postponed to a week later, to which it *would* be invited, and at which it would delight itself to its heart's content.

The Court was engaged in celebrating the marriage of Marguerite de Valois, daughter of King Henri II. and sister of King Charles IX., with Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre. In point of fact, the Cardinal de Bourbon had that same morning united the bride and bridegroom, with the ceremonial customary at the weddings of Princesses of France, upon a stage erected at the porch of Notre-Dame.

This marriage had amazed everybody, and had given much food for reflection to sundry who were more clear-sighted

than the rest. This drawing together between two factions so antagonistic as were the Protestant and Catholic parties at the present moment, was not easy to understand; people wondered how the young Prince de Condé could forgive the Duc d'Anjou, the King's brother, for the death of his father, who had been murdered at Jarnac by Montesquiou. They asked how the young Duc de Guise could pardon Admiral de Coligny for the death of his own father, who had been assassinated at Orleans by Poltrot de Méré. More than this: Jeanne de Navarre, the courageous wife of the weak Antoine de Bourbon, who had brought her son Henri to Paris in order to settle the terms of the Royal alliance, had died barely two months ago, and singular rumours were abroad respecting her sudden decease. Everywhere it was whispered, and sometimes even asserted openly, that she had discovered some terrible secret, and that Catherine de' Medici, fearing the revelation of this secret, had poisoned her with some perfumed gloves, prepared by one René, a Florentine, who was an expert in matters of this nature. Additional confirmation had been given to this report by the fact that, after the death of this great queen, two physicians, one of whom was the celebrated Ambroise Paré, had been instructed, at the request of her two sons, to open and examine the body, with the exception of the brain. Now, as Jeanne de Navarre had been poisoned by the perfume, it was the brain, the only part of the body excluded from the autopsy, and the brain alone, which could furnish proof of the crime. We say crime advisedly, for none doubted that a crime had been perpetrated.

Nor was this all. King Charles, in particular, had shown a persistence amounting to obstinacy in bringing about

this marriage, which would not merely restore peace to his realm, but would likewise attract to Paris all the leaders of the Huguenot faction. Inasmuch as one of the two parties to the marriage belonged to the Catholic, and the other to the Reformed Religion, it had been necessary to apply for a dispensation to Gregory XIII., who at that time occupied the Papal throne. The dispensation was slow in coming, and this delay had caused great anxiety to the late Queen of Navarre, who one day expressed to Charles IX. her fears that it would not arrive at all, to which the King had replied :

"Do not be uneasy, my good aunt ; I honour you more than I do the Pope, and I love my sister more than I fear him. I am not a Huguenot, but neither am I a fool, and, should the Pope prove unmanageable, I will myself take Margot by the hand and give her in marriage to your son before the whole Church."

This speech had spread from the Louvre through the city, and, while causing great rejoicing to the Huguenots, had given much food for thought to the Catholics, who inquired of one another in undertones whether the King was really betraying them, or whether he was not rather playing some comedy which would result some fine day in an unexpected *dénouement*.

Especially inexplicable did the conduct of Charles IX. appear to Admiral de Coligny, who for five or six years had maintained a determined struggle against the King. After having set a price upon his head of one hundred and fifty thousand gold crowns, Charles now swore by him alone, styling him his "father," and declaring openly that he would henceforth confide the conduct of the War to none but the Admiral. So far did he go, indeed, that Catherine de' Medici, who had hitherto controlled the actions and even the wishes and desires of the young Prince, began to grow seriously uneasy, and not without good reason, for Charles, in a moment of effusion, when speaking of the War in Flanders, had remarked to the Admiral :

"My father, there is one thing in this matter of which we must be very careful, and that is, that the Queen Mother, who, as you know, likes to have her finger in every pie, should know nothing of this enterprise ; we must keep the affair so

secret that she does not get the slightest inkling of it, for, mischief-maker as I know her to be, she would ruin the whole concern."

Well, Coligny, wise and experienced as he was, had been unable to hold his tongue about the secret the King had entrusted to him in such strict confidence ; and although he had arrived in Paris full of suspicions, although at his departure from Châtillon a peasant woman had thrown herself at his feet, exclaiming :—"Oh ! sir, our good master, do not go to Paris, for if you do, you will perish, you and all who go with you"—yet these suspicions had gradually faded from his breast, and from that of Téligny, his son-in-law, towards whom also the King professed a great friendship, styling him "brother" as he styled the Admiral "father," and conversing with him on as familiar terms as he did with his most intimate and particular friends.

Accordingly the Huguenots, with the exception of some of the more gloomy and distrustful spirits, were completely reassured ; the Queen of Navarre's death was set down as having been caused by pleurisy, and the vast saloons of the Louvre were thronged by all the worthy Protestants to whom the marriage of their young chief Henri promised an altogether un hoped-for change of fortune. Admiral de Coligny, La Rochefoucauld, the young Prince de Condé, Téligny, all the leaders of the Party, in short, triumphed at seeing all-powerful at the Louvre, and so welcome in Paris, those very persons whom three months previously King Charles and Queen Catherine would fain have hanged on gallows higher than those of murderers. The Marshal de Montmorency alone was missing from this illustrious fraternity. Incapable either of being seduced by promises, or deceived by appearances, he had remained in retirement at his Castle of Isle-Adam, alleging as excuse for his absence the grief which he still felt at the death of his father, who had been slain by a pistol-shot at the battle of Saint-Denis, by Robert Stuart. But as this event had happened more than three years back, and as depth of feeling was a virtue quite out of fashion at this period, he had not won the credit which he would have wished to gain for this mourning,

so inordinately prolonged. Everything besides seemed to decide against the Marshal de Montmorency; the King, the Queen, the Duc d'Anjou, and the Duc d'Alençon, were wonderfully gracious to everyone at the royal reception.

The Duc d'Anjou received from the Huguenots themselves well-earned compliments in respect to the two battles of Jarnac and Moncontour, victories gained by him before he had attained the age of eighteen, eclipsing by this precocity both Cæsar and Alexander, to whom they compared him, maintaining, of course, his decided superiority over the victors of Issus and Pharsalia; the Duc d'Alençon listened to these compliments with a fawning, yet insincere expression; Queen Catherine beamed with delight, and, with an air of utmost graciousness, congratulated Prince Henri de Condé on his recent marriage with Marie de Clèves; lastly, the Messieurs de Guise themselves smiled upon the formidable enemies of their house, while the Duc de Mayenne discoursed with Monsieur Tavannes and the Admiral about the coming war, which it was now more than ever a question of declaring against Philip II.

Amid these groups there passed backwards and forwards, with head slightly inclined and ears open to all topics of conversation, a young man of nineteen, with keen eyes, black hair cut extremely short, bushy eyebrows, nose curved like an eagle's beak, an artful smile, and beard and moustache just sprouting. This young man, who had done nothing to distinguish himself until the battle of Arnay-le-Duc, where he had risked his life with much gallantry, and who was now receiving numerous compliments thereon, was the much-loved pupil of Coligny and the hero of the day. Three months ago, that is to say, while his mother was still alive, he had been styled the Prince de Béarn; now his title was King of Navarre, until the time came for him to be called Henri IV.

Occasionally a dark cloud would pass swiftly over his brow; he was doubtless recalling the fact that it was less than two months since his mother's death, and he, more strongly than anybody, suspected that she had been poisoned. But the cloud was a passing one, and disappeared like a floating shadow; for those who were congratulating him and

rubbing shoulders with him were the very men who had assassinated the courageous Jeanne d'Albret.

At a short distance from the King of Navarre, and almost as pensive and anxious as the latter affected to be gay and frank, the young Duc de Guise was chatting with Téligny. More fortunate than the Béarnais, at the age of two and twenty his reputation had almost equalled that of his father, the great François de Guise. A nobleman of handsome appearance, tall stature, proud and haughty mien, he was endowed with that natural majesty which caused men to say that, when *he* passed by, the other Princes appeared but as commonplace people in comparison with him. Young as he was, the Catholics saw in him the leader of their party, just as the Huguenots saw their leader in the young Henri de Navarre, whose appearance we have just depicted. At an earlier date he had borne the title of Prince de Joinville, and had made his *début* at the siege of Orleans, under the command of his father, who had died in his arms, pointing out to him Admiral Coligny as his slayer. Whereupon the young Duke, like Hannibal, had sworn a solemn oath that he would be revenged for his father's death upon the Admiral and his family, and that he would hunt the Protestants down without rest or truce, vowing to God to be His Destroying Angel upon earth until the last of the Heretics should be exterminated. It was not, therefore, without profound astonishment that this Prince, usually so faithful to his word, was seen to offer his hand to those whom he had sworn to regard as eternal foes, and chatting familiarly with the son-in-law of the very man whose death he had promised his dying father that he would compass.

But, as we have said, this was an evening of surprises.

In point of fact, had he possessed that knowledge of the future which is happily lacking to men, together with that power of reading the heart which unhappily belongs to God alone, the privileged observer who might have been allowed to take part in this reception would certainly have enjoyed one of the most curious spectacles furnished by the annals of the mournful comedy of human affairs.

But this imaginary observer, who had

no place in the inner corridors of the Louvre, continued to gaze in the street with his fierce eyes, and to growl with his menacing voice; this observer was, in fact, the populace, which, with its marvellous instinct sharpened by hatred, followed from a distance the shadows of its implacable enemies, and translated its impressions into words as frankly as an inquisitive person in front of the windows of a ball-room hermetically closed can do. The music intoxicates the dancer as he moves to its melodious rhythm, while the curious spectator, seeing nothing but the movement, and not hearing the music, laughs at the apparently objectless gestures of the puppets.

The music which intoxicated the Huguenots was the voice of their pride.

The flames which danced in the eyes of the Parisians were the lightning-flashes of their hatred shedding their lurid light upon the future.

Within the Palace, however, everything wore a smiling face; nay, at this very moment a murmur more sweet and flattering than any that had preceded it was circulating through the Louvre, to the effect that the young bride, having laid aside her cloak of state and her long wedding-veil, had just returned to the ball-room, accompanied by the beautiful Duchesse de Nevers, her bosom friend, and escorted by her brother, Charles IX., who was presenting to her the chief of his guests.

This bride was the daughter of Henri II., the pearl of the crown of France, Marguerite de Valois, whom King Charles IX., in his tender affection for her, never addressed but as "Sister Margot."

Certainly no reception, of however flattering a nature, was ever more deserved than that which was at this moment being accorded to the new Queen of Navarre. Marguerite had scarcely reached her twentieth year, yet she was already the object of the encomiums of all the poets, some of whom compared her with Aurora, others with Venus. She was, in truth, the peerless beauty of that Court, where Catherine de' Medici had assembled, to play the part of her Sirens, all the loveliest women she could find. Marguerite had dark hair, a brilliant complexion, a voluptuous eye, veiled by dark lashes, a well cut and rosy mouth, a graceful neck, a full and supple bust, and, lost in its satin slipper, the foot of a

child. The French, to whom she belonged, were proud to see so magnificent a flower blossom on their soil, while foreigners passing through France returned from it dazzled by her beauty, if they had merely seen her; amazed at her learning, if they had conversed with her. Marguerite was not only the most beautiful, but also the best-read woman of her time, and people quoted the saying of an Italian scholar who had been presented to her, and who, after talking with her for an hour in Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Latin, had left her presence with the enthusiastic remark:—"To see the Court without seeing Marguerite de Valois is to see neither the Court nor France itself."

Accordingly, there was no lack of speeches made to King Charles IX. and to the Queen of Navarre; the Huguenots, as we know, were great at speeches. Many allusions to the past, many requests for the future, were adroitly conveyed to the King amid these orations; but to all these allusions he replied with his pale lips and crafty smile:

"In giving my sister Margot to Henri de Navarre, I give my sister to all the Protestants in the Kingdom."

This saying, while reassuring some, made others smile, for it contained in reality two meanings: the one paternal, with which Charles IX. in all good conscience was unwilling to over-burden his mind; the other, offensive to the bride, to her husband, and also to himself, since it recalled certain grave scandals with which the Court Chronicle had already found means to smirch the nuptial robe of Marguerite de Valois.

However, M. de Guise was chatting, as we have said, with Téligny; but he was not so absorbed in the conversation as to prevent him from occasionally turning to bestow a glance on the group of ladies, in the centre of which shone the Queen of Navarre. If at such moments the Queen's glance encountered that of the young Duke, a cloud seemed to darken that charming brow, on which the diamond stars formed a dancing halo, and some vague, half-formed purpose manifested itself in her impatient and uneasy attitude.

The Princess Claude, Marguerite's eldest sister, who had been now for some years married to the Duc de Lorraine, had noticed this uneasiness, and was

approaching her to ask the cause of it, when, owing to the retirement of the whole assembly before the Queen-mother, who advanced, leaning on the arm of the young Prince de Condé, the Princess found herself separated by some distance from her sister. A general movement then occurred, of which the Duc de Guise availed himself to approach Madame de Nevers, his sister-in-law, and, consequently, Marguerite's also. Madame de Lorraine, who had not taken her eyes off the young Queen, then saw, instead of the cloud which she had noticed on her brow, a deep blush overspread her cheeks. The Duke, however, was still advancing, and when he arrived within two paces of her, Marguerite, who seemed to feel rather than see his approach, turned round with a violent effort to compose her features into indifference; thereupon the Duke bowed respectfully before her, and murmured *sotto voce*:—

"*Ipse attuli.*"

Which meant to say:

"*I have brought him, or, have brought myself.*"

Marguerite returned the young Duke's bow, and, as she lifted her head again, let fall this reply:

"*Noctu pro more.*"

Which signified:

"To-night as usual."

These softly-spoken words, swallowed up as in a speaking-trumpet by the Princess's enormous starched collar, were heard only by the person to whom they were addressed; but short as the dialogue had been, it doubtless embraced all that the two young people had to say to each other, for after exchanging these five words they separated, Marguerite with a look more dreamy than ever, and the Duke with an expression more radiant than before they had met. This little scene had occurred without the man who was the most interested in it having appeared to take the slightest notice of it, for the King of Navarre, on his side, had eyes but for one person, around whom was gathered a court almost as numerous as that of Marguerite de Valois; this person was the beautiful Madame de Sauve.

Charlotte de Beaune-Semblançay, grand-daughter of the unfortunate Semblançay and wife of Simon de Fizes, Baron de Sauve, was one of the ladies of the bedchamber to Catherine de' Medici,

and one of the most formidable auxiliaries of that Queen, who poured upon her enemies the philtre of love when she dared not employ the Florentine poison against them; small, fair, by turns sparkling with vivacity or languishing with melancholy, every ready for love and for intrigue, the two principal subjects which for the last fifty years had occupied the Courts of three kings in succession; a woman in the full acceptance of the word and in all its charm, from the blue eyes which languished or blazed with fire down to the tiny feet bent rebelliously into their velvet slippers, Madame de Sauve had already for several months entirely captivated the King of Navarre, who was then making his *début* in the career of love, as in that of politics. So much so that Marguerite de Navarre, with her splendid and regal beauty, had not even moved her husband's heart to admiration; and, what was strange and surprising to everybody, even on the part of that lover of darkness and mystery, the Queen-Mother, was that Catherine de Medici, while pursuing her scheme of alliance between her daughter and the King of Navarre, had not ceased to countenance almost openly the intimacy between the latter and Madame de Sauve. But, spite of this powerful aid and of the easy-going morals of the time, the fair Charlotte had hitherto resisted his advances; and this resistance, so unexpected, so incredible, and so unheard-of, even more than her wit and beauty, had inflamed the heart of the Béarnais with a passion which, unable to find satisfaction, had fallen back upon itself and had devoured in the young Monarch's heart the timidity, the pride, and even the indifference, half philosophical, half idle, which lay at the bottom of his character.

Madame de Sauve had only entered the ball-room a few minutes earlier. Whether from spite or from annoyance, she had at first determined not to be a witness of her rival's triumph, and, alleging indisposition as an excuse, had allowed her husband, for five years one of the Secretaries of State, to come alone to the Louvre. Catherine de' Medici, however, on seeing the Baron without his wife, had inquired the reason which kept her beloved Charlotte away, and on hearing that the indisposition was but slight, wrote a few lines requesting her presence, and with this request the young woman

had hastened to comply. Henri, though at first quite woe-begone at her absence, had nevertheless breathed more freely on seeing M. de Sauve enter by himself; but at the moment when, having ceased to expect her appearance, he moved off with a sigh towards the lovely creature whom he was condemned, if not to love, at least to treat as his wife, he had seen Madame de Sauve emerging from the end of a corridor, and had remained rooted to the spot with his eyes fixed on this Circe, who enchained him to herself as though with a magic bond, and instead of continuing his progress towards his wife, with a movement of hesitation caused far more by surprise than by alarm, he advanced towards Madame de Sauve.

The courtiers, for their part seeing that the King of Navarre, the condition of whose heart they already knew, was making towards his fair Charlotte, had not the courage to prevent their meeting, but complacently made way, so that at the same moment when Marguerite de Valois and M. de Guise were exchanging the few words in Latin which we have reported, Henri, who had now reached Madame de Sauve, entered upon a much less mysterious conversation with her in quite intelligible French, though marked with something of a Gascon accent.

"Ah! my sweet!" said he, "here you are, come back, just as they were telling me that you were ill, and I had lost all hope of seeing you."

"Would your Majesty pretend to make me believe," answered Madame de Sauve, "that it cost you much to abandon that hope?"

"Zounds! I should think so," answered the Béarnais; "do you not know that you are my sun by day and my star by night? Truly I thought myself plunged in the blackest darkness, when you appeared just now and of a sudden lit up the world for me."

"Then I am doing you a bad turn, Monseigneur."

"How mean you, sweet?" asked Henri.

"I mean that, being lord of the fairest woman in France, your sole desire should be for the light to give place to darkness, since it is the darkness which brings us happiness."

"That happiness, cruel creature, lies in the hands of one alone, as you know

full well, and she laughs at her poor Henri, and makes him her sport

"Oh!" replied the Baronne, "I should have thought for my part that, on the contrary, it was she who is the plaything and the laughing-stock of the King of Navarre."

Henri was alarmed at her hostile attitude. He reflected, however, that it betokened pique, and that pique is but the mask which conceals love.

"Truly, dear Charlotte," said he, "you reproach me unjustly, and I do not understand how so sweet a mouth can be at the same time so cruel. Do you imagine, then, it was I who brought about my marriage? By the Lord! No, it was not my doing."

"Perhaps it was mine!" replied the Baronne, harshly, if the voice of the woman who loves you, and who reproaches you with not loving her, can ever appear harsh.

"Have you not seen farther with those lovely eyes of yours, Baronne? No, no, it is not Henri de Navarre who weds Marguerite de Valois."

"And who, then?"

"Zounds! it is the Reformed Religion that is marrying the Pope, and nothing more."

"Nay, not so, Monseigneur, nor do I understand your jests: your Majesty loves the Lady Marguerite, and God forbid I should reproach you for it; she is beautiful enough to be loved."

Henri reflected for an instant, and while he reflected, a smile compressed the corners of his lips.

"Baronne," said he, "you are trying to pick a quarrel with me, I fancy, and yet you have no right to do so; what have you done, I ask you, to prevent me from marrying the Lady Marguerite? Nothing at all; on the contrary, you have always forbidden me to hope."

"And I was quite right in so doing, Monseigneur!" replied Madame de Sauve.

"How so?"

"Certainly, since to-day you have wedded another."

"Ah! I have wedded her because you do not love me."

"Had I loved you, sire, I must have died within an hour!"

"Within an hour! How mean you, and of what would you have died?"

"Of jealousy . . . for within an hour

the Queen of Navarre will dismiss her ladies, and your Majesty your gentlemen."

"Is that really and truly the thought which troubles you, my sweet?"

"I do not say that. I said that, *if* I loved you, the thought would trouble me horribly."

"Well!" exclaimed Henri, overwhelmed with joy at hearing this avowal, the first he had received—"suppose the King of Navarre were *not* to dismiss his gentlemen to-night?"

"Sire," said Madame de Sauve, regarding the King with an astonishment which this time was not assumed, "you talk of what is impossible, nay more, incredible."

"What must I do to make you believe it?"

"You must give me the proof of it, and that proof you cannot give."

"Yes, Baronne, yes; by St. Henri! I will give it you, I will," cried the King, devouring the girl with a burning look of love.

"Oh, your Majesty!" murmured the fair Charlotte, lowering her voice and her eyes. . . . "I do not understand. . . No, no! it is impossible that you should avoid the happiness awaiting you."

"There are four Henris in this room, my adored!" replied the King; "Henri of France, Henri of Condé, Henri of Guise, but only one Henri of Navarre."

"Well?"

"Well! if you have this Henri of Navarre near you all this night?"

"All this night?"

"Yes; will you then feel certain that he is with no other lady?"

"Ah! if you do *that*, sire!" exclaimed Madame de Sauve.

"I will do it, on the honour of a gentleman."

Madame de Sauve raised her large eyes moist with voluptuous promise, and smiled at the King, whose heart was elated with joy.

"Come," replied Henri, "what would you say in that case?"

"Oh! in that case," answered Charlotte, "I should say that your Majesty loved me really and truly."

"Zounds! then you *shall* say it, Baronne, for so it is."

"But how are we to act?" murmured Madame de Sauve.

"Great heavens! Baronne, you surely

have some waiting-woman about you, some follower, some girl on whom you can depend?"

"Oh! I have Daricle, a regular treasure; she is so devoted to me that she would lay down her life for my sake."

"Zounds! Baronne, tell that girl that I will make her fortune when I am King of France, as the astrologers predict I am to be."

Charlotte smiled, for the Gascon reputation of Henri in regard to his promises was already well established.

"Well!" she said, "what do you want Daricle to do?"

"Nothing much for her, but everything for me."

"Go on?"

"Your apartment is above mine?"

"Yes."

"Let her wait behind the door. I will knock gently thrice; she must open the door, and then you shall have the proof which I have offered you."

Madame de Sauve maintained a silence that lasted a few moments; then, looking round as though to ensure that her words would not be overheard, she glanced for an instant at the group where the Queen-mother was standing; but though only for an instant, it was sufficient to enable Catherine and her lady of the bed-chamber to exchange glances.

"Oh! if I wished to catch your Majesty in an untruth," said Madame de Sauve, in siren tones that would have melted the wax in Ulysses's ears.

"Try me, my sweet, try—"

"Ah! I confess that I am struggling against the desire to do so."

"Let yourself be conquered; women are never so strong as after their defeat."

"Sire, I hold you to your promise for Daricle on the day that you are King of France."

Henri uttered an exclamation of joy.

It was at the very moment that this exclamation left his lips that the Queen of Navarre replied to the Duc de Guise:

"*Noctu pro more*: To-night, as usual."

Upon which Henri left the side of Madame Sauve with a delight equal to that felt by the Duc de Guise as he left the side of Marguerite de Valois.

An hour after this two-fold incident, which we have just related, King Charles and the Queen-mother withdrew to their own apartments. Almost immediately

the rooms began to empty, and the bases of the marble columns in the corridors became once more visible. The Admiral and the Prince de Condé were escorted home by four hundred Huguenot gentlemen through the crowds which hooted them as they passed. Presently Henri de Guise, accompanied by the Lorraine noblemen and the Catholics, came out in their turn and were greeted by the populace with shouts of joy and applause.

As for Marguerite de Valois, Henri de Navarre, and Madame de Sauve, they were lodged, as we know, in the Louvre itself.

CHAPTER II

THE QUEEN OF NAVARRE'S BEDCHAMBER

THE Duc de Guise escorted his sister-in-law, the Duchesse de Nevers back to her house, which was in the Rue du Chaume, opposite to the Rue de Brac, and after handing her over to her women, passed to his own apartments in order to change his costume for a cloak suited to the night, and to arm himself with one of those short, sharp daggers which were nick-named "On the word of a gentleman," and were carried without a sword; but on taking it from the table on which he had laid it, he perceived a small note wedged between the blade and the sheath.

Opening this, he read as follows:—

"I earnestly hope that M. de Guise will not return to the Louvre to-night, or, if he does, that he will at least take the precaution to arm himself with a good coat-of-mail and sword."

"Aha!" said the Duke, turning towards his valet-de-chambre, "here is a curious warning, Master Robin. Now be good enough to tell me who are the persons who have got in here during my absence."

"One person only, Monseigneur."

"And who is he?"

"M. du Gast."

"Ah! just so: I rather fancied I recognised the hand. And you are sure that Du Gast came? You saw him?"

"I did more, Monseigneur, I talked with him."

"Good; then I will follow his advice. My coat-of-mail and my sword."

The valet-de-chambre, well accustomed to these changes of costume, brought them both. The Duke thereupon put on his jacket, composed of chains of mail so pliable that the texture of the steel was hardly thicker than velvet; next he drew on his long hose, and a doublet of grey and silver, his favourite colours, high boots, which came up to the middle of his thighs, placing on his head a cap of black velvet, without either plume or jewels, wrapped himself in a dark-coloured cloak, fastened a dagger in his girdle, and placing his sword in the hands of a page, the sole escort that he desired to accompany him, took the road for the Louvre.

Just as he crossed the threshold of his house the watchman at St. Germain-l'Auxerrois announced the hour of one in the morning.

Though the night was so far advanced, and the streets at this period far from safe, our adventurous Prince met with no accident by the way, and arrived safe and sound in front of the huge mass of the ancient Louvre, all the lights of which had gradually been extinguished, and which loomed out darkly in the silence of night.

In front of the Royal Palace extended a deep moat which was overlooked by most of the rooms of the princes who were lodged in the Palace. Marguerite's apartments were situated on the first floor.

But this first floor, which would have been accessible had there been no moat, was, owing to its existence, raised about thirty feet above the ground, and consequently beyond the reach of lovers or burglars, although this fact did not deter the Duke from descending resolutely into the ditch.

At the same moment was heard the sound of a window on the ground-floor being opened. This window was guarded by bars; but a hand appeared, removed one of these bars which had been loosened beforehand, and through this opening let down a thread of silk.

"Is it you, Gillonne?" asked the Duke in a low tone.

"Yes, Monseigneur," replied a woman's voice in a lower tone still.

"And Marguerite?"

"She is waiting for you."

"Good."

With these words the Duke signed to his page, who, opening his cloak, unrolled a slender ladder of rope. The Prince fastened one end of the ladder to the silken thread. Gillonne drew the ladder up and fastened it firmly; and the Prince, after buckling his sword to his girdle, commenced the ascent, which he accomplished without accident. When he had passed through the window, the bar was replaced and the window closed again, while the page, after seeing his master quietly enter the Louvre, to the windows of which he had frequently escorted him in a similar fashion, went and lay down, wrapping himself in his cloak, on the grass at the bottom of the moat, and beneath the shadow of the wall.

The night was dark, and a few large, warm drops of rain fell from the clouds charged with electricity.

The Duc de Guise followed his conductor, who was no other than the daughter of Jacques de Matignon, Marshal of France; this girl was the confidential friend of Marguerite, who had no secrets that she did not share with her, and it was asserted that among the mysteries locked in the incorruptible fidelity of her breast were some so terrible that these latter compelled her to keep silence as to all the rest.

No light remained either in the lower chambers or in the corridors, but from time to time a livid lightning-flash momentarily illuminated the dark apartments with a glare of ghastly, blue light.

The Duke, still led by his guide, who held him by the hand, reached at last a spiral staircase built in the thickness of the wall, and opening by a secret and invisible door upon the ante-chamber leading to Marguerite's apartments.

The ante-chamber, like the rest of the lower rooms, was in the most profound darkness.

On reaching this ante-chamber Gillonne stopped.

"Have you brought what the Queen desires?" she inquired in a low tone.

"Yes," answered the Duc de Guise, "but I will hand it only to her Majesty herself."

"Then come without another moment's delay!" said a voice out of the darkness which made the Duke start, for he recognised it as Marguerite's.

At the same moment a curtain of purple velvet and gold fleurs-de-lis was

raised, and the Duke discerned in the shadow the Queen herself, who in her impatience had come to meet him.

"I am here, Madame," said the Duke, passing quickly behind the curtain, and letting it fall into its place again.

It was now the turn of Marguerite de Valois to guide the Prince through this apartment, with which, however, he was well acquainted, while Gillonne, remaining at the door, conveyed to her Royal mistress a sign of reassurance by placing her finger on her lips.

Marguerite, as though conscious of the jealous uneasiness which was disturbing the Duke, led him into her bed-chamber; there she stopped.

"Well, Duke," she said, "are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied, Madame? with what, I ask you?"

"With this proof I am giving you," replied Marguerite, with a slight accent of annoyance, "that I belong to a man who, on his very wedding-night, holds me so cheaply as not even to have come to thank me for the honour I have done him, not in choosing him, but in accepting him as my husband."

"Oh! Madame," said the Duke sadly, "rest assured that he will come, especially if you wish him to do so."

"And it is *you* who say that, Henri," cried Marguerite, "you, who of all people know the contrary! If I had the desire that you credit me with, should I have asked you to come to the Louvre?"

"You asked *me* to come here, Marguerite, because you desire to destroy all trace of our past relations, and because that past lives not only in my heart but also in this silver casket which I have brought you."

"May I tell you one thing, Henri?" replied Marguerite, looking the Duke steadily in the face, "and that is that you are acting more like a schoolboy than a Prince. I deny that I have loved you! I desire to extinguish a flame which may die, perhaps, but the reflection of which will never be quenched! For the amours of people of my station set ablaze, and often bring disaster upon, the whole period in which they live. No, no, my Lord Duke; you can keep your Marguerite's letters and the casket which she gave you. She only asks of you a single letter of those which it contains, and that

because this letter is as dangerous to you as to herself."

"They are all yours," said the Duke; "select the one which you wish to destroy."

Marguerite searched the opened casket eagerly, and with a trembling hand took up, one after another, some dozen letters, contenting herself with merely looking at their addresses, as though this of itself would recall to her memory the contents of the letters; but after going through them all, she looked at the Duke and said, turning very pale the while:

"Nay, sir, the one I am looking for is not there; you haven't lost it by any chance, for as to handing it over——."

"Which letter are you looking for, Madame?"

"The one in which I told you to get married without delay."

"In order to excuse your unfaithfulness?" Marguerite shrugged her shoulders.

"No, but to save your life. The letter in which I told you that the King, perceiving our mutual love, and the efforts I was making to break off your union with the Infanta of Portugal, had summoned his brother, the Bastard of Angoulême, and, showing him two swords, had said to him: 'Slay Henri de Guise with this sword to-night, or I will kill him with the other to-morrow.' Where is that letter?"

"Here," said the Duc de Guise, drawing it from his breast.

Marguerite almost tore it from his hands, opened it eagerly, assured herself that it was the one she was in search of, uttered an exclamation of joy, and thrust it into the candle. The flame immediately caught it and consumed it, but Marguerite, as though fearing that even its ashes might convey information, crushed the charred remains beneath her foot.

The Duc de Guise had followed with his eyes the restless actions of his mistress.

"Well! Marguerite," said he when she had finished, "are you satisfied now?"

"Yes; for now that you have married the Princesse de Porcian, my brother will forgive you for loving me; while he would not have forgiven me for revealing such a secret which, in my weakness for you, I should not have had the strength to conceal from you."

"True," said the Duke; "at that time you loved me."

"And I love you still, Henri, as much as, nay more than ever."

"Do you? . . ."

"Yes, I do; for never more than to-day did I need a true and devoted friend. A queen, I have no throne; a woman, I have no husband."

The young Prince shook his head sadly.

"But when I tell you, Henri, when I repeat that my husband not only does not love me, but that he hates and despises me; besides, I think the mere fact of your presence in the room where he ought to be is good proof of this hatred and contempt."

"It is still early, Madame, and the King of Navarre has required time to dismiss his gentlemen; if he has not come yet, he will not be long in doing so."

"And I tell you that he will not come," cried Marguerite with increasing vexation.

"Madame," said Gillonne, opening the door and raising the curtain, "The King of Navarre is coming from his rooms."

"Oh! I knew very well that he would come!" exclaimed the Duc de Guise.

"Henri," said Marguerite, in a peremptory tone, and seizing the Duke by the hand, "you shall see if I am a woman of my word, and if you can depend on me when I have once given a promise. Henri, go into that closet."

"Madame, let me go away if there be yet time, for reflect that at the first sign of affection he gives you, I come out of that closet, and then woe betide him!"

"You are mad! go in, go in, I tell you; I will answer for everything."

And she pushed the Duke into the closet.

She was just in time. Scarcely had the door closed on the Duke, when the King of Navarre, escorted by two pages bearing eight wax candles in two candelabra, appeared smiling on the threshold of the chamber.

Marguerite concealed her uneasiness by making a profound reverence.

"You have not yet retired to bed, Madame?" asked the Béarnais with a frank expression of pleasure on his countenance; "were you by chance expecting me?"

"No, sir," answered Marguerite, "since you told me but yesterday that you knew quite well that our marriage was a political union, and that you would

never force me to submit to your embraces."

"Well and good; but that is no reason why we should not converse together for a little while. Shut the door, Gillonne, and leave us."

Marguerite, who had sat down, rose and extended her hand as if to order the pages to remain.

"Must I call your women?" asked the King. "I will do so if you insist upon it, though I must confess that, in view of what I have to say to you, I should prefer that we were alone."

And the King of Navarre stepped towards the closet.

"No," cried Margaret, throwing herself impetuously in front of him; "no, it is unnecessary, and I am ready to listen to you."

The Béarnais had discovered what he wished to learn; he threw a swift and searching glance towards the closet, as though desirous, in spite of the curtain which concealed it, to penetrate its dark recesses; then, fixing his eyes upon his wife, who was now pale with alarm:

"In that case, Madame," said he, in a perfectly calm tone, "let us have a little talk together."

"As your Majesty pleases," said Marguerite, sinking rather than sitting down upon the chair indicated by her husband. The Béarnais sat down beside her.

"Madame," he continued, "our marriage, whatever people may say of it, is, I think, a good marriage. I am entirely yours and you are mine."

"But——" said Marguerite, in terror.

"Consequently," the King went on, without appearing to notice her hesitation, "we ought to treat one another as good allies since we have to-day sworn alliance to each other before God. Is not that your opinion?"

"Certainly it is."

"I know, Madame, the greatness of your penetration; I know, also, how the ground of this Court is strewn with dangerous pitfalls; well, I am young, and, although I have never injured anybody, I have plenty of enemies. In which camp, Madame, am I to reckon her who bears my name, and who has sworn at the altar to love me?"

"Oh, sir, could you imagine——"

"I imagine nothing, Madame; I hope, and I should like to be assured that my hope is well founded. It is certain that

our marriage is either merely a pretext or a trap."

Marguerite started, for the same idea had possibly occurred to her mind.

"Now, which of the two is it?" continued Henri de Navarre. "The King hates me, the Dukes of Anjou and Alençon hate me, Catherine de' Medici hated my mother too much not to hate me also."

"Oh! sir, what are you saying?"

"The truth, Madame," replied the King, "and I should wish that there were someone here to hear my words, so that I might not be thought to be the dupe of those who assassinated M. de Mouy and poisoned my mother."

"But, sir," said Marguerite, quickly, with the most calm and smiling expression she could command, "you know there is nobody here but we two."

"That is just why I am speaking with such freedom, and why I dare to tell you that I am not deceived either by the blandishments of the French Court or by those of the house of Lorraine."

"Sir! sir!" cried Marguerite.

"Well, what is the matter, sweet one?" asked Henri, smiling in his turn.

"The matter is, sir, that such speeches are very dangerous."

"Not when we are quite alone," replied the King. "Well, I was telling you——"

Marguerite was evidently suffering tortures; she would fain have arrested the words upon her husband's lips; but Henri continued, with apparent unconcern:

"I was telling you, then, that I am threatened on all sides: by the King, by the Duc d'Alençon, by the Duc d'Anjou, by the Queen-Mother, by the Duc de Guise, by the Duc de Mayenne, by the Cardinal de Lorraine—by everybody, in short. You know, Madame, one feels these things instinctively. Well! against all these threats, which will not be long in developing into attacks, I can defend myself with your help, since you are beloved by all the persons who hate me."

"I!" said Marguerite.

"Yes, you," replied Henri de Navarre, with perfect good humour; "yes, you are beloved by King Charles; you are beloved"—he dwelt upon the word—"by the Duc d'Alençon and by Queen Catherine; and, lastly, you are beloved by the Duc de Guise."

"Sir——" murmured Marguerite.

"Well! is there anything surprising in the fact that everyone loves you? All those whom I have just named are either your brothers or your relations, and to love these is but to obey God's commandment."

"But to what does all this tend, sir?" asked Marguerite, in a troubled tone.

"It tends to what I have already told you, that with you for, I will not say my friend, but my ally, I can brave everything; while, on the other hand, with you for my enemy, I am lost."

"Oh! sir, your enemy, never!" cried Marguerite.

"But my friend, if never any more than that?"

"Perhaps."

"And my ally?"

"Certainly."

And Marguerite turned and extended her hand to the King.

Henri took it, kissed it gracefully, and keeping it within his own much more with a desire of investigation than from any sentiment of tenderness:

"Well! Madame, I believe you," said he, "and accept you as my ally. So they have married us without our either knowing or loving one another; without consulting us who are chiefly concerned. We therefore owe each other nothing as husband and wife. You see, Madame, that I meet your wishes, and confirm to-day what I promised you yesterday. But we enter into this alliance freely, under compulsion from nobody, as two loyal hearts that unite for mutual protection; that is how you understand the matter, is it not?"

"Yes, sir," said Marguerite, trying to withdraw her hand.

"Well!" continued the Béarnais, keeping his eyes still fixed on the door of the closet, "since the first proof of a frank alliance is the most absolute confidence, I am going to acquaint you, Madame, in its minutest details, with the scheme that I have formed with a view of successfully combating this hostility."

"Sir," murmured Marguerite, in her turn, involuntarily directing her eyes towards the closet, while the Béarnais, seeing the success of his ruse, smiled in his sleeve.

"This is what I intend to do," he continued, without seeming to notice her agitation; "I intend——"

"Sir," cried Marguerite, rising abruptly and grasping the King by the arm, "let me have breath; the emotion—the heat—I am choking."

And, in point of fact, Marguerite was pale and trembling, as though about to fall on the floor. Henri walked to a window at the further end of the room and opened it; this window overlooked the river.

Marguerite followed him.

"Silence! silence! sir, in pity for yourself," she murmured.

"What! Madame," said the Béarnais with his customary smile, "did you not say that we were alone?"

"Yes, sir; but have you not heard that by means of an air-tube inserted in a wall or ceiling, all that passes can be overheard?"

"True, Madame, true," said the Béarnais, in a low tone. "You do not love me, it is true; but you are an honourable woman."

"What mean you, sir?"

"I mean that, were you capable of betraying me, you might have let me go on until I betrayed myself by my own words. You stopped me. I know now that someone is concealed here; that you are an unfaithful wife, but a loyal ally, and at the present moment," added the Béarnais with a smile, "I stand in greater need of fidelity in matters of policy than in love——"

"Sir," murmured Marguerite, in confusion.

"There, there, we will talk of all this later on, when we know each other better," said Henri.

"Yes, yes," murmured Marguerite.

"In that case I will not disturb you longer. I owed you my respects and some advances in the way of friendship; accept them as they are offered, with all my heart. Go to rest then, and good night."

Marguerite directed towards her husband a look beaming with gratitude, and, in her turn, extended her hand.

"It is settled," said she.

"A political alliance, frank and loyal?" asked Henri.

"Frank and loyal," replied the Queen.

Upon this the Béarnais stepped towards the door, while Marguerite, as though fascinated, followed him with her gaze. Then, when the curtain had fallen, and they had passed out of the

bed-chamber, Henri said quickly, in a low tone:—

"Thank you, Marguerite; thank you; you are a true daughter of France. I go away with my mind at ease. In default of your love, your friendship, at least, will not fail me. I rely upon you, as you may rely upon me. Adieu, Madame."

Henri kissed his wife's hand, and pressed it softly; then went back at a brisk pace to his own apartments, saying to himself softly as he passed along the corridor:

"Who the deuce is in there with her? Is it the King, the Duc d'Anjou, the Duc d'Alençon, the Duc de Guise, is it a brother or lover, or both? I am really almost sorry now that I made that appointment with the Baronne: but since I have given my word and Dariole is waiting for me . . . never mind; she will be rather a sufferer, I fear, from the fact that I have passed through my wife's bed-chamber on my way to her, for, by God, this Margot, as my brother-in-law Charles calls her, is an adorable creature."

And with a step that betrayed a slight hesitation, Henri de Navarre ascended the staircase leading to the apartment of Madame de Sauve.

Marguerite had followed him with her eyes until he disappeared, and had then returned to her room. She found the Duke at the door of the closet; the sight of him inspired her with something akin to remorse.

The Duke, for his part, looked serious, and his contracted brows betokened that his thoughts were unpleasantly pre-occupied.

"Marguerite is neutral to-day," said he; "in a week she will be hostile."

"Ah! then you heard?" said Marguerite.

"What did you expect I should do in that closet?"

"And do you think I behaved otherwise than as became the Queen of Nazarre?"

"No, but otherwise than as becomes the mistress of the Duc de Guise."

"Sir," replied the Queen, "I cannot love my husband, but no one has the right to demand of me that I should betray him. Honestly, now; would you betray the secrets of your wife, the Princesse de Porcian?"

"Come, come, Madame," said the Duke, shaking his head, "that is enough. I see that you no longer love me as in the days when you told me what the King was plotting against me and mine."

"The King was then the strong and you the weak: Henri is now the weak and you the strong. You see that I still play the same part."

"Only you have crossed from the one camp to the other."

"I have acquired the right to do so, sir, by having saved your life."

"Very well, Madame; and as, when lovers part, they restore all that has been given them, I, in my turn, will save your life if the opportunity occurs, and we shall be quits."

With these words the Duke bowed and withdrew without Marguerite making any movement to stop him.

In the ante-chamber he found Gillonne, who conducted him to the window on the ground-floor, and in the moat he found his page, with whom he returned to the Hôtel de Guise.

Meanwhile Marguerite had gone to the window, and stood there wrapt in thought.

"What a wedding-night!" she murmured; "my husband shuns me and my lover deserts me!"

At this moment there passed on the other side of the moat, coming from the Tour de Bois, and ascending towards the Moulin de la Monnaie, a student, with his arms akimbo, singing lustily:

Why, when I your lips would taste,
And fain would clasp your slender waist,
And feast upon your eyes so pure,
Why do you play the nun demure,
Enclosed by cloister walls?

For whom do you reserve your charms,
Your bosom, eyes, and rounded arms?
Think you Pluto's love to share—
When Charon shall have rowed you there—
In his dark and silent halls?

Down there, fair one, when you die,
Upon a bed of straw you'll lie;
And when I meet you there below,
I shall not to the Shades avow
That you were once my sweet.

Therefore, while youth and beauty last,
Amend your coldness in the past
And to my suit relent.
For when you're dead, you will repent
You spurned me from your feet.

Marguerite listened to this ballad with a doleful smile; then, when the student's voice had died away in the distance, she closed the window again, and summoned Gillonne to help her to prepare for bed.

CHAPTER III

A POET KING

THE next day and those that succeeded it were spent in *fêtes*, ballets, and tourneys.

The two parties continued to fraternise with one another. The Huguenots were treated with an attention and respect sufficient to turn the heads of the most embittered among them. Père Cotton had been seen dining and making merry with the Baron de Courtaumer, and the Duc de Guise had gone up the Seine with the Prince de Condé in a barge, attended by a band of musicians.

King Charles appeared to have laid aside his habitual melancholy, and to be unable to do without the company of his brother-in-law Henri. Lastly, the Queen-Mother was so cheerful and so taken up with embroideries, jewels and plumes, as to lose her sleep.

The Huguenots, though but slightly mollified by this new Capua, began to don once more their silken doublets, to set up emblems, and to parade in front of certain balconies just as though they were Catholics. On all sides there was a reaction in favour of the Reformed Religion, such as to make people imagine the entire Court was going to turn Protestant. The Admiral himself, spite of his previous experience, allowed himself to be carried away like the rest, and became so excited that one evening he forgot for two whole hours to chew his tooth-pick, an occupation to which he usually gave himself up the moment his dinner was finished until eight o'clock at night, when he sat down again to supper.

On the evening when the Admiral had relapsed into this incredible forgetfulness of his usual habits, Charles IX. had invited Henri de Navarre and the Duc de Guise to sup with him in private.

At the termination of the meal he took them into his cabinet, and was there explaining to them the ingenious mechanism of a wolf-trap invented by himself, when, breaking off suddenly, he asked:

"Isn't the Admiral coming this evening? Has anyone seen him to-day? Can anyone give me news of him?"

"I have seen him," said the King of Navarre, "and in case your Majesty should be anxious about his health I can set your mind at ease, for I saw him this morning at six o'clock, and again this evening at seven."

"Oh! indeed," said the King, whose eyes, momentarily distracted, now fixed themselves with a piercing gaze upon his brother-in-law, "You are up very early, Henriot, for a newly-married man!"

"Yes, sire," replied the King of Navarre, "I was anxious to learn from the Admiral, who knows everything, whether some gentlemen whom I am still expecting are likely to arrive soon."

"More gentlemen! why, you had eight hundred on the day of your wedding, and they still keep arriving every day. Do you want to invade us?" asked Charles, laughing.

The Duc de Guise frowned.

"Sire," replied the Béarnais, "there is talk of an expedition against Flanders, and I am collecting round me all those of my own country and the neighbouring districts whom I think likely to prove serviceable to your Majesty."

The Duke, recollecting the scheme of which the Béarnais had spoken to Marguerite on the wedding-day, listened more attentively.

"Good, good!" answered the King, with his deceitful smile, "the more of them there are, the better pleased we shall be; bring them up, Henri, bring them up. But who are these gentlemen? Courageous fellows, I trust?"

"I don't know, sire, whether my men are equal to your Majesty's, or those of the Duc d'Anjou, or the Duc de Guise, but I know their worth, and am certain they will do their best."

"Are there many that you still expect?"

"Some ten or a dozen more."

"And their names?"

"Sire, their names have escaped me, and with the exception of one of them.

recommended to me by Téliigny as an accomplished gentleman, and called De la Mole, I could not tell you. . . ."

"De la Mole!" replied the King, who was well versed in genealogical matters, "isn't he one Lerac de la Mole, a Provençal?"

"The same, sire; I gather recruits even in Provence, as you see."

"And I," said the Duc de Guise, with a mocking smile, "go even further than his Majesty the King of Navarre, for I am going to hunt even in Piedmont for all the trusty Catholics I can find."

"Catholics or Protestants," interrupted the King, "it matters little, provided they are valiant."

The King had assumed such a tone of indifference in saying these words, which seemed, from his point of view, to place Protestants and Catholics upon an equal footing, that even the Duc de Guise was astonished.

"Your Majesty is discussing the Flemish?" said Admiral de Coligny, to whom the King some days earlier had granted the privilege of visiting him unannounced, and who had heard the last words spoken by His Majesty.

"Ah! here is my father, the Admiral," cried Charles IX., opening his arms; "we talk of war and gallant gentlemen, and he arrives like iron attracted by the magnet. My brother-in-law of Navarre and my cousin of Guise are expecting reinforcements for your army; that is what we were discussing."

"And these reinforcements are arriving," said the Admiral.

"Have you had any news, sir?" asked the Béarnais.

"Yes, my son, more particularly with regard to M. de la Mole; he was at Orleans yesterday, and will be in Paris to-morrow or the day after."

"Plague take it! The Admiral must be a wizard to know thus what is taking place at thirty or forty leagues' distance! For my own part, I should like to know with equal certainty what happened or has happened before Orleans."

Coligny remained impervious to this deadly thrust of the Duc de Guise, which evidently bore reference to the death of his father, François de Guise, who had been slain at Orleans by Poltrot de Méré, not without a suspicion that the Admiral had suggested the deed.

"Sir," he replied coldly and with

dignity, "I am always a wizard when I wish for positive information as to what concerns my own business or that of the King. My messenger arrived from Orleans an hour ago, and, thanks to his relays of horses, accomplished thirty-two leagues within the day. M. de la Mole, who is riding his own horse, travels but ten leagues a day, and will not arrive until the twenty-fourth. That is the whole magic."

"Bravo! my father; well answered," said Charles. "Prove to these young men that it is wisdom as well as old age that has whitened your hair and your beard; and now we will send them away to talk of their tourneys and love affairs, while we remain together to discuss our wars. Good advisers make good kings, my father. Come, gentlemen, I wish to talk with the Admiral."

The two young men went out, the King of Navarre first, followed by the Duc de Guise; once outside the door, however, each turned with a frigid bow in his own direction.

Coligny had followed them with his eyes with some uneasiness, for he never saw these two hostile spirits meet without fearing that some fresh explosion would follow. Charles, comprehending what was passing in his mind, advanced to him and linking his arm in the Admiral's, observed:

"Make your mind easy, my father, I am here to exact obedience and respect from everyone. I am veritably King, now that my mother is no longer Queen, and that she has ceased to be, now that Coligny is my father."

"Oh! sire," said the Admiral, "Queen Catherine——"

"Is a mischief-maker. With her there can be no peace. The Italian Catholics are enraged, and will hear of nothing but extermination. I, on the contrary, am not only for pacific measures, but would even wish to place power in the hands of those of the Reformed Religion. The other Party are too dissolute, my father, and scandalise me by their amours and irregularities. Look! would you like me to speak frankly," continued Charles, waxing increasingly confidential, "I mistrust all who surround me except my new friends. I suspect the ambition of the Tavannes. Vieilleville cares about nothing but good wine, and would betray his Sovereign for a cask of Malmsey.

Montmorency thinks of nought but his hunting, and spends his time between his hounds and his falcons. The Comte de Retz is a Spaniard, the Guises are Lorrainers. I don't believe there are any true Frenchmen in France, so help me God! except myself, my brother-in-law of Navarre, and you. But, for myself, I am tied to the throne and cannot lead armies into the field. It is as much as they will do to let me hunt in peace at Saint-Germain and Rambouillet. My brother-in-law of Navarre is too young and inexperienced. Besides, he seems to me to take in every respect after his father, Antoine, of whom women were ever the ruin. There is no one left but you, my father, who are at once as brave as Julius Cæsar and as wise as Plato. So, really and truly, I don't know what I ought to do; to keep you here as my adviser or send you there as general. If you remain to give advice, who will lead the army? If you command, who will advise me?"

"Sire," said Coligny, "you must conquer first; after the victory will come the time for counsel."

"That is your opinion, my father? Well! be it so. Your advice shall be taken. You shall start to-morrow for Flanders, and I for Amboise."

"Your Majesty leaves Paris?"

"Yes. I am tired of all this noise and all these fêtes. I am no man of action, but a dreamer. I was not born to be a King but a poet. You shall form a sort of Council, who will manage affairs while you are at the Wars; and provided my mother has no hand in it, all will go well. I have already told Ronsard to come and join me; and there, far from all uproar, far from the madding crowd and from evil-doers, we two, beneath our spacious woods, on the banks of the river, and to the accompaniment of the murmur of the brooks, will talk of the things of God, the sole compensation for human affairs which this world contains. Come, listen to these lines, in which I have invited him to join me; I composed them this morning."

Coligny smiled. Charles passed his hand across his forehead, which was as yellow and smooth as ivory, and recited in a kind of sing-song the following lines:

Ronsard, I know that, should you see me not,
Your Monarch's voice will be by you forgot,
So let me tell you that I still pursue
The art poetic erst begun with you;
This trifle, therefore, I desired to send
To stir the ambition of my poet friend.

Come, cease your absorption in household affairs,
The time is gone by for gardening cares;
The King summons you, whom he loves of all men,
For the verses so sweet which fall from your pen;
And know, should you fail to Amboise to repair,
A serious quarrel with me you will share."

"Bravo! sire, bravo!" said Coligny, "I know more of war than I do of poetry, but these verses seem to me to equal the finest of Ronsard, Dorat, and even Michel de l'Hospital, Chancellor of France."

"Ah! my father!" cried Charles, "how truly you speak; for the title of poet, mark you, is the one that I desire above all things; and, as I said to my master in poetry a few days ago:

The art poetic (I'm indignant at the thing)
Should sure rank higher than that of being King;
Poet and King, each wears a crown upon his brow,
But I, the King, receive it, you, the bard, bestow.
Your spirit, kindled by celestial flame,
Shines of itself, I but by greatness of my name;
While, from the gods, if I seek predilection,
Ronsard their darling is, I, their mere reflection.
Your lyre, enchanting with its dulcet tone,
Enthrals men's minds—I but their bodies own—
Makes you their lord, and thus you win your way
Where proudest monarch never yet held sway."

"Sire," said Coligny, "I was well aware that your Majesty conversed with the Muses, but I had no notion you had taken them as your chief advisers."

"Next to you, my father, next to you; and it is in order that my relations with them may not be disturbed that I wish to put you at the head of affairs. Listen, then; I must reply immediately to a new madrigal sent me by my great and beloved poet . . . so I cannot now give you all the documents necessary for acquainting you with the great question on which Philip II. and I are divided. Moreover, there is a kind of plan of campaign sketched out by my Ministers. I will hunt up all these and hand them to you to-morrow morning."

"At what hour, sire?"

"At ten o'clock; and if I should happen to be engaged with my verses and shut up in my study . . . well! you can

come in here all the same and take all the papers you find on this table enclosed in this red portfolio; the colour is bright, and you cannot make any mistake. Now I am going to write to Ronsard."

"Adieu, sire."

"Adieu, my father."

"Your hand!"

"My hand, did you say? in my arms, clasped to my breast, that is your place. Come, my old warrior, come."

And Charles, drawing Coligny to him as he bowed, placed his lips on his white locks.

The Admiral went out, wiping away a tear.

Charles looked and listened until he was out of sight and hearing, then let his pale face droop, as was his wont, between his shoulders, and walked slowly from the room into the closet where his collection of weapons was stored.

This room was a favourite one of the King's; in it he took lessons in fencing with Pompée, and in poetry with Ronsard. In it was placed a large collection of the finest weapons, and the finest armour that he had been able to find. The walls were covered with axes, shields, pikes, halberds, pistols, and musketoons, and that very day a noted armourer had brought him a splendid arquebus, on the stock of which were engraved in silver these lines composed by the royal poet himself:

In defence of the faith I am loyal;
'Gainst the foes of the King I am cruel.

This room Charles entered on the present occasion, and, after carefully closing the door, raised a curtain which concealed a passage leading to a chamber where a woman, kneeling before a *prie-dieu*, was engaged in prayer.

As his movements had been slow, and his steps, deadened by the thick carpet, had made no more noise than if he had been a ghost, the woman, hearing nothing, continued her prayers without turning round. Charles stood for a moment, looking at her in deep thought.

She was a woman of four or five and thirty, whose striking beauty was heightened by the costume worn by the peasants in the neighbourhood of Caux. She wore the high cap which was so fashionable at the French Court during the reign of Isabeau de Bavière, and her

red corsage was covered with gold embroidery, like those worn by the peasants of Nettuno and Sora at the present day. The room which she had occupied for nearly twenty years adjoined the King's bed-chamber, and presented a singular mixture of elegance and rusticity in which the palace and the cottage were blended in almost equal proportions, so that the apartment occupied a middle position between the simplicity of the villager and the luxury of the great lady. Thus the *prie-dieu* at which she knelt was of oak, wonderfully carved, and covered with gold-fringed velvet, while the Bible—for she belonged to the Reformed Religion—from which she read her prayers was one of those old, tattered volumes such as are found in the poorest houses. The rest of the furniture of the room was in keeping with this *prie-dieu* and this Bible.

"Well! Madelon," said the King.

On hearing his familiar voice she raised her head with a smile; then, getting up from her knees, she said:

"Ah! it is you, my son!"

"Yes, nurse, come here."

Charles let the curtain fall back again, and went and took a seat on the arm of a chair. The nurse followed him.

"What do you want with me, Charlot," said she.

"Come here, and speak softly."

The nurse approached, with a familiarity which might have been born of that maternal tenderness of the woman for the child whom she has nursed at her breast, but to which the lampoons of the day ascribed a cause infinitely less pure.

"Here I am," said she; "speak."

"Is the man I sent for here?"

"He has been here for half an hour."

Charles got up and went to the window to see that no one was on the watch, held his ear close to the door to make sure that no one was listening, shook the dust from his stands of arms, stroked a large greyhound which was following his steps, stopping when his master stopped and advancing when he advanced; then, turning to the nurse:

"Very well, nurse, bring him in."

The worthy woman went out by the same passage by which she had entered, while the King went and leaned against a table on which weapons of various kinds were lying.

He had scarcely reached this table

when the curtain was raised again to give admission to the man whom he was expecting.

This was a person of about forty, with grey and shifty eyes, a nose hooked like a screech-owl's, and projecting cheek-bones; his features endeavoured to express respect, though his lips, blanched by terror, could only assume a hypocritical smile.

Charles gently extended a hand behind his back and grasped the butt of a newly-invented pistol which was fired by means of a flint in contact with a wheel of steel instead of by a match, then fixed his dull eye upon the new-comer and scrutinised him narrowly, at the same time whistling the air of one of his favourite hunting-songs with remarkable accuracy and melodiousness.

After a few seconds, during which the stranger's countenance grew more and more disconcerted:

"You are François de Louviers-Maurevel?" asked the King.

"The same, sire."

"Commander of the Petardiers?"

"Yes, sire."

"I wished to see you."

Maurevel bowed.

"You know," continued Charles, dwelling on each word, "that I love all my subjects equally."

"I know," stammered Maurevel, "that your Majesty is the father of his people."

"And the Huguenots and the Catholics are equally my children."

Maurevel remained dumb; the tremor, however, which shook his frame was visible to the King's piercing glance, although the man whom he addressed was almost hidden in shadow.

"That is disappointing to you," continued the King, "you who have waged such stern war against the Huguenots."

Maurevel fell upon his knees.

"Sire," he stammered, "believe me—"

"I believe," continued Charles, fixing more intensely on Maurevel a glance which, from being cold, became almost flashing, "I believe that you wanted at Moncontour to kill the Admiral who has just left me; that you failed in your object, and that you then joined the army of my brother, the Duc d'Anjou; that you went afterwards for the second time to the Princes and took service in the company of M. de Mouy de St. Phale—"

"Oh! sire!"

"A brave nobleman of Picardy?"

"Sire, sire," cried Maurevel, "do not crush me!"

"And a worthy officer," continued Charles, on whose face an almost ferocious cruelty was depicted as he went on talking, "who welcomed you as a son, lodged you, fed and clothed you."

Maurevel uttered a sigh of despair.

"You called him your father, I believe," the King continued mercilessly, "and a tender friendship bound you to young De Mouy, his son?"

Maurevel, still on his knees, bent to the ground, more and more crushed by the words of the King, who stood over him motionless, like a statue which the lips alone endowed with life.

"By-the-bye," continued the King, "was it not ten thousand crowns that you were to receive from M. de Guise in case you killed the Admiral?"

The assassin, in his consternation, seemed to strike the very floor with his forehead.

"As for the lord of Mouy, your good father, one day you accompanied him on a reconnoitring party which he was pushing forwards towards Chevreux. He let his whip fall, and dismounted to pick it up. You were alone with him; you then snatched a pistol from your holsters and shot him in the back as he was stooping; when you saw that he was dead—for you killed him with one shot—you escaped upon the horse which he had given you. That, I believe, is the story?"

And as Maurevel met this accusation, each detail of which was true, in silence, Charles began to whistle the same hunting-song with the same accuracy and melodiousness as before.

"So now, sir murderer," said he, after an instant, "do you know that I have a great mind to hang you?"

"Oh! your Majesty!" cried Maurevel.

"The young De Mouy entreated me to do so but yesterday, and I really did not know how to answer him, for his demand is perfectly just."

Maurevel clasped his hands.

"All the more so because, as you said, I am the Father of my people, and because, as I told you, now that I have patched up matters with the Huguenots, they are as much my children as the Catholics."

"Sire," said Maurevel, in abject

despair, "my life is in your hands, do with me as you will."

"You are right, and I would not give you a groat for it."

"But, sire," answered the assassin, "is there no way in which I can redeem my crime?"

"I hardly think so. Still, if I were in your place, which, thank God, I am not. . . ."

"Well, sire! if you were in my place?—" murmured Maurevel, hanging in suspense on Charles's lips.

"I think I should find a way of extricating myself," continued the King.

Maurevel raised himself on one knee, and fixed his eyes on Charles to assure himself that the King was not joking.

"I like young De Mouy very much, of course," the King went on, "but I like my cousin of Guise much more, and if the latter were to beg the life of a man whose death was demanded by the former, I confess I should be much puzzled how to act. However, from political as well as from religious motives I ought to do what my cousin of Guise asks me, for De Mouy, brave officer as he is, is of small importance in comparison with a Prince of Lorraine."

During these words Maurevel rose from the ground slowly, like a man returning to life.

"Well, the important thing for you, then, in your critical position, is to gain the favour of my cousin of Guise, and *à propos* I remember something he was telling me yesterday."

Maurevel came a step nearer.

"Just fancy, sire," he said to me, "that every morning at ten o'clock my deadly enemy passes through the Rue Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois on his return from the Louvre; I see him go by from a barred window on the ground-floor, a window belonging to the house of my old tutor, the Abbé Pierre Piles, and every time I see him go by, I utter a prayer that the Devil might pitch him into hell."

"Now, master Maurevel," continued Charles, "supposing you were the Devil, or at least could take his place for a moment, perhaps my cousin of Guise might be pleased."

Maurevel recovered his sinister smile, and his lips, still white with fear, let fall the words:

"But, sire, I cannot send him to hell."

"You did so, however, if I remember

rightly, for the brave De Mouy. After that, will you tell me that with a pistol—haven't you got that pistol still?—"

"Pardon me, sire," replied Maurevel, with somewhat more assurance, "but I shoot better with the arquebus than the pistol."

"Oh!" said Charles, "pistol or arquebus, it makes little difference, and I am sure my cousin of Guise will not wrangle over the choice of weapons."

"But," said Maurevel, "I must have a weapon on whose accuracy I can rely, for perhaps I may have to shoot from some distance."

"I have ten arquebuses in this room," replied Charles, "with which I can hit a gold crown at a hundred and fifty paces. Will you try one of them?"

"Oh! sire! with the greatest pleasure," cried Maurevel, going towards the weapon lying in a corner, and which had been brought to the King that very day.

"No, not that one," said the King; "I reserve that for my own use. I am going to have a great hunt one of these days, when I hope it will prove useful; but take your choice of the others."

Maurevel took down an arquebus from a stand.

"Now, sire, this enemy, who is he?" asked the assassin.

"How should I know that?" replied the King, crushing the wretch with a look of contempt.

"Then I will ask M. de Guise," stammered Maurevel.

The King shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask nothing," said he; "M. de Guise will not answer you. Do you think people get replies to such questions? It is the business of those who want to escape hanging to guess for themselves."

"Still, how am I to recognise him?"

"I have told you that he passes the Abbé's window every morning at ten."

"But a great many people go past that window; will your Majesty deign to give me some slight hint?"

"Oh! that's easily done: to-morrow, for example, he will carry a red morocco portfolio under his arm."

"Sire, that is sufficient."

"Have you still that fast horse which M. de Mouy gave you?"

"Sire, my mount is one of the swiftest."

"Oh! I am not uneasy about you! only, it is well you should know that the cloister has a door at the rear."

"Thanks, sire. Now, pray God speed me."

"What! pray the Devil rather, for it is only by his protection that you can escape the halter."

"Adieu, sire."

"Adieu. Ah! by the bye, Monsieur de Maurevel, you know that if by any chance you should be heard of *before* ten o'clock to-morrow, or if you should *not* be heard of *after* ten, there is a dungeon in the Louvre!"

And Charles IX. started afresh to whistle his favourite air softly and more melodiously than ever.

CHAPTER IV

THE EVENING OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH
OF AUGUST, 1572.

OUR reader has not forgotten that mention was made in the preceding chapter of a gentleman called La Mole, for whom Henri de Navarre was waiting somewhat impatiently. This young gentleman, as the Admiral had announced, entered Paris by the Porte Saint-Marcel, towards the close of the day of the 24th of August, 1572, and bestowing a somewhat contemptuous glance on the numerous hostelrys displaying their picturesque signs to right and left, rode his still-smoking horse into the heart of the City, where, after crossing the Place Maubert, the Petit-Pont, the Notre-Dame Bridge, and passing along the quays, he stopped at the end of the Rue de Bresec, turned by us at a later date into the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, and which, for the greater convenience of our readers, we shall allude to under its modern name.

The name doubtless pleased him, for he turned down the street, and, his attention being attracted by a fine piece of metal creaking on its iron support at his left hand, halted once more in order to read these words: *A la Belle-Etoile*, painted beneath a picture representing an object most attractive to the hungry traveller; namely, a fowl roasting against a dark sky, while a man in a red cloak was extending towards this new sort of star, his arms, his purse, and his desires.

"Here," said the rider to himself, "is an inn which promises well, and the host who keeps it must be an ingenious fellow, upon my word. I have always heard say that the Rue de l'Arbre Sec was near the Louvre, and provided the establishment fulfils the promise of its sign-board, I shall do capitally here."

While the newcomer was uttering this soliloquy, another horseman, who had entered the street from its opposite end, that is to say from the Rue Saint-Honoré, also halted and remained in ecstasy before the sign of the *Belle-Etoile*.

The one of these horsemen whom we know, at least by name, rode a white horse of Spanish breed, and was dressed in a black doublet trimmed with jet. His cloak was of dark purple velvet; he wore boots of black leather, and carried a sword with a hilt of chased steel, and a dagger similarly ornamented. Passing from his equipment to his face, we shall remark that he was a man of four or five and twenty, of sunburnt complexion, with blue eyes, a slight moustache, and a row of white teeth, which seemed to light up his features when he opened a perfectly-shaped mouth to give expression to a sweet though melancholy smile.

As for the second traveller, he presented a complete contrast to the first. Beneath his hat, with its turned-up brim, appeared a rich and curly crop of hair, red rather than fair; beneath his hair were grey eyes, which, at the slightest opposition, flashed with a fire so brilliant that you would then have called them black.

The rest of his face consisted of a ruddy complexion, thin lips surmounted by a fair moustache, and a splendid set of teeth. In short, with his fair skin, his tall stature, and his broad shoulders, he was a very handsome cavalier in the ordinary acceptation of the term, and for the past hour, during which he had been staring up into every window on pretence of looking for sign-boards, had attracted much attention on the part of the fair sex; as for the men, who at first perhaps had shown some inclination to laugh on seeing his scanty cloak, tight-fitting hose, and old-fashioned boots, they had ended this laugh with a most gracious "God keep you!" on a survey of this countenance, which assumed ten different expressions in a minute, with the one exception, however, of that benevolent and deprecating expression which always

distinguishes the face of the provincial visitor when in a difficulty.

It was he who first accosted the other gentleman who, as we have said, was thus inspecting the hostelry of the *Belle-Etoile*.

"Zounds! sir," he observed, with that dreadful mountain accent which, at his first word, makes a man known for a Piedmontese among a room full of strangers, "are we not somewhere near the Louvre? At any rate, you seem to have the same taste as myself, which is flattering to my dignity."

"Sir," replied the other with a Provençal accent in no way less marked than the Piedmontese accent of his companion, "I fancy that, in point of fact, this inn is near the Louvre. I am, however, still asking myself whether I shall have the honour of agreeing with your opinion; I am debating the question in my mind."

"You have not yet decided, sir? The house, however, looks attractive, and in addition I have perhaps allowed myself to be influenced by your presence. You will allow, at any rate, that the sign is a tempting one?"

"Oh! no doubt; but it is exactly that which makes me doubt whether the reality will come up to it. Paris is full of swindlers I have been told, and you can cheat by means of a sign-board as well as with anything else."

"Zounds, sir," replied the Piedmontese, "I don't bother my head about trickery, and should the host serve me up a fowl less well roasted than that on the sign, I'll put him on the spit himself, and not leave him until he is browned to a nicety. Let us go in, sir."

"You have decided me," said the Provençal, laughing; "so lead the way, sir, I beg of you."

"Upon my soul, sir, I will do nothing of the kind, for I am but your humble servant, Comte Hannibal de Coconnas."

"And I, sir, am but Comte Joseph Hyacinthe Boniface de Lerac de la Mole, at your service."

"In that case, sir, let us take arms and enter together."

The result of this conciliatory proposal was that the two young men, dismounting from their horses and throwing their reins to an ostler, took each other by the arm, and settling their swords, made for the door of the inn, on the threshold of which stood the landlord. Contrary,

however, to the custom with such persons, the worthy proprietor appeared to have taken no notice of them, being engaged in a very earnest conversation with a tall fellow, with a wizened, yellow face, ensconced, like an owl among its feathers, in a drab cloak.

Our two friends were so close to the host and the man in the cloak with whom he was conversing, that Coconnas, annoyed at the neglect shown to himself and his companion, pulled the landlord by the sleeve. The latter appeared to rouse himself with a start, and took leave of his interlocutor with the words:

"Au revoir. Come again soon, and mind you keep me informed how things are going."

"Here, you rascal!" said Coconnas, "don't you see that we have business with you?"

"Ah! I beg pardon, messieurs," said the host; "I did not see you."

"Zounds! you ought to have seen us; and now that you have done so, instead of saying 'monsieur' in that abrupt fashion, say 'Monsieur le Comte,' if you please."

La Mole stood in the rear, letting Coconnas, who seemed to have taken the affair into his own hands, do the talking. It was easy, however, to see by the frown on his brow that he was prepared to come to his aid when the moment for action should arrive.

"Well! what is your will, Monsieur le Comte?" asked the landlord in a more subdued tone.

"Good; that's better already, is it not?" said Coconnas, turning to La Mole, who nodded his head. "M. le Comte and myself, being attracted by your sign-board, desire to find supper and lodging in your hostelry."

"Gentlemen," said the landlord, "I am exceedingly sorry, but I have only one room, and I am afraid that it will not be suitable for you."

"Oh! well, so much the better," said La Mole; "we will go and lodge elsewhere."

"No, no," said Coconnas. "I will stay, at any rate; my horse is worn out. I will have the room, then, since you do not want it."

"Ah! that's quite another matter," answered the landlord, still maintaining the same imperturbability. "If there is only one of you I can't put you up at all."

"Zounds!" cried Coconnas, "a pretty fellow, upon my word. Just now we were two too many, and now we are not enough by one! You don't want to take us in, then, you rascal?"

"Upon my word, gentlemen, since you take that tone, I will give you a straight answer."

"Answer, then, and be quick about it."

"Well, then, I prefer not to have the honour of entertaining you."

"Because?——" asked Coconnas, growing white with rage.

"Because you have no grooms, and therefore, for one gentleman's room occupied, I should have two grooms' chambers empty. Now, if I give you the gentleman's room, I run the risk of not letting the others."

"Monsieur de la Mole," said Coconnas, turning round, "don't you agree with me that we must teach this fellow a lesson?"

"It seems justifiable," said La Mole, preparing, like his companion, to belabour the landlord with his whip.

But in spite of this double demonstration, somewhat alarming on the part of two gentlemen who appeared so determined, the innkeeper showed no surprise, and merely retreated a step within the doorway.

"It is easy to see," he remarked in a jeering tone, "that these gentlemen hail from the country. In Paris the fashion of butchering innkeepers for refusing to let their rooms is obsolete. It is the great lords, and not the citizens, who get butchered, and if you make much disturbance I shall call in my neighbours, and it is you who will get the thrashing, a punishment quite beneath the dignity of two gentlemen."

"Zounds! he is laughing at us," cried Coconnas, with rising wrath.

"Grégoire! my arquebus," said the landlord, addressing his drawer, in the same tone that he might have said, "a seat for these gentlemen."

"By the Pope!" roared Coconnas, drawing his sword; "come, warm up, Monsieur de La Mole!"

"Not so, an it please you; for while we are getting warm, our supper will be getting cold."

"What! you mean to say?——" cried Coconnas.

"I mean that mine host of the *Belle-Etoile* has right on his side; only he doesn't know how to deal with travellers,

especially when those travellers are gentlemen. Instead of saying to us uncivilly: 'Gentlemen, I don't want to have anything to do with you,' he would have done better to have said politely: 'Enter, gentlemen,' being free to put in his bill: *Gentleman's room, so much; lackey's room, so much*; seeing that, though we have no lackeys at present, we expect to have some."

Saying this, La Mole gently pushed aside the innkeeper, who was already extending his hand towards his arquebus, made Coconnas pass in, and entered the house behind him.

"Never mind," said Coconnas, "it's as much as I can do to replace my sword in the sheath without satisfying myself that it pricks as sharply as this rogue's larding-needles do."

"Patience, my dear comrade," said La Mole, "patience! All the inns are full of gentlemen attracted to Paris by the marriage festivities, or for the approaching war with Flanders, and we shouldn't find any other quarters; mayhap, too, it is the custom in Paris to receive strangers in this way on their arrival."

"Zounds! you are patient, and no mistake!" muttered Coconnas, twisting his red moustache with fury, and pulverising the innkeeper with his glance. "But let the rascal look to himself; if his cooking is bad, if his beds are hard, if his wine is not three years in bottle, if his drawer is not as supple as a rush——"

"There, there, my gentleman," said the host, sharpening his knife on a grindstone, "make your mind easy; you are in the country where things are to be had for the asking."

Then with a shake of the head, he muttered *sotto voce*:

"It is some Huguenot; the traitors have become so insolent since the marriage of their Béarnais with Mistress Margot!"

Upon which he added, with a smile which would have made his guests shudder had they seen it:

"Ha! ha! it would be amusing if Huguenots had chanced to tumble in here—and if——"

"Look here! can we have our supper?" asked Coconnas, sharply, interrupting his host's asides.

"Why, just as you please, sir," replied the latter, mollified no doubt by the thought that had just occurred to him.

"Well! we do please, and quick's the word," answered Coconnas.

Then, turning to La Mole:

"Come, Monsieur le Comte," said he, "while they are preparing our room, tell me, does Paris happen to strike you as a gay city?"

"My word! no," said La Mole; "I seem to have come across nothing but scared or crabbed faces. Perhaps the Parisians are in fear of a storm. Look how black the sky is, and how oppressive the atmosphere."

"Tell me, Count, you are looking for the Louvre, are you not?"

"And you, too, I believe, Monsieur de Coconnas."

"Well, we will look for it together, if you like."

"Eh! isn't it rather late to go out?" said La Mole.

"Late or not, I must go; my orders are peremptory—make for Paris as quickly as possible, and communicate with the Duc de Guise the instant you arrive."

On hearing the Duc's name mentioned, the landlord approached and listened attentively.

"I fancy this rascal is listening to us," said Coconnas, who, being a Piedmontese, was rather spiteful, and could not forgive the host of the *Belle Etoile* for the unceremonious fashion in which he had welcomed them.

"Yes, gentlemen," said the landlord, touching his cap, "I am listening, but only in order to serve you. I heard the great Duc de Guise mentioned, and so I hurried forward. In what way can I oblige you, gentlemen?"

"Ha! that name apparently is magical in its effects, for, from being insolent, you have become obsequious. Zounds! master—master—what is your name?"

"Master La Hurière," replied the landlord, with a bow.

"Well! Master La Hurière, do you fancy that my arm is less heavy than the Duc de Guise's, who has the privilege of making you so polite?"

"No, Monsieur le Comte, but it is not so long," replied La Hurière. "Besides," added he, "I must tell you that this great Henri is idolised by us Parisians."

"Which Henri?" asked La Mole.

"I imagine there is only one," said the innkeeper.

"Pardon me, my friend, there is

another Henri, of whom I would advise you to say no harm, and that is Henri de Navarre, not to mention Henri de Condé, who is also an excellent prince."

"I know nothing about *them*," answered the host.

"Yes, but *I* do," said La Mole, "and as my business is with King Henri de Navarre, I recommend you not to abuse him in my presence."

The host, without replying to M. de la Mole, contented himself with slightly touching his cap, and continuing to gaze at Coconnas with admiration, observed:

"So you are going to speak with the great Duc de Guise? You are very fortunate, and no doubt you have come here for——"

"For what?" asked Coconnas.

"For the fête," answered the host, with a curious smile.

"You should say rather for the fêtes, for Paris is glutted with them, I am told; at least, people talk of nothing but balls, banquets, and carousals. There is plenty of amusement in Paris, eh!"

"A fair amount so far, sir; but we are going to have an abundance, I hope."

"At any rate, the marriage of His Majesty, the King of Navarre, has drawn plenty of people to the city," said La Mole.

"Plenty of Huguenots, yes, sir," replied La Hurière, sharply; then, recovering himself: "I beg your pardon," said he, "perhaps you gentlemen belong to the Religion?"

"To the Religion!" cried Coconnas, "not I! I am as Catholic as the Holy Father himself."

La Hurière turned to La Mole as if to question him; but La Mole either did not understand his look, or thought it better not to reply except by another question.

"If you don't know His Majesty, the King of Navarre, Master La Hurière, perhaps you know the Admiral? I have heard that he enjoys some measure of favour at the Court; and as I have been recommended to him, I should be glad to know where he resides, if it will not burn your mouth to mention his address."

"He *was* residing in the Rue de Béthisy, to the right here, sir," answered the host, with an inward satisfaction which he was unable to disguise in his outward manner.

"Was residing?" asked La Mole; "has he removed, then?"

"Yes, out of this world, very likely."

"What does he say?" exclaimed the two gentlemen simultaneously; "the Admiral removed from this world!"

"Why! Monsieur de Coconnas," went on the host with a cunning smile, "you are of the party of Guise and don't know that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that the day before yesterday, as he was going through the Place Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, the Admiral was shot by an arquebus just in front of the house of the Canon Pierre Piles."

"And was he killed?" cried La Mole.

"No, he only had his arm and two fingers smashed, but it is hoped that the bullets were poisoned."

"What, you wretch! hoped!—"

"I mean to say, believed," replied the host. "Don't let us quarrel about a word; my tongue tripped."

And La Hurière, turning his back on La Mole, thrust out his tongue in the most jeering fashion, accompanying this gesture with a wink at Coconnas.

"Really and truly," said Coconnas, beaming.

"Really and truly!" murmured La Mole, with mournful stupefaction.

"It is just as I have the honour to tell you, gentlemen," replied the host.

"In that case," said La Mole, "I must go to the Louvre without a moment's delay. Shall I find King Henri there?"

"It is possible, for he is lodged there."

"And I also must go to the Louvre," said Coconnas. "Shall I find the Duc de Guise there?"

"Most probably, for I saw him pass by a short time ago with two hundred gentlemen."

"Come, then, Monsieur de Coconnas," said La Mole.

"I will follow you, sir," said Coconnas.

"But your supper, gentlemen?" asked La Hurière.

"Ah!" said La Mole, "perhaps I shall have supper with the King of Navarre."

"And I with the Duc de Guise," said Coconnas.

"And I," said the host, as he looked after the two gentlemen who took the road to the Louvre, "will polish up my helmet, prime my arquebus, and sharpen my halberd. One never knows what may happen."

CHAPTER V

OF VIRTUE IN GENERAL AND OF THE LOUVRE IN PARTICULAR

THE two gentlemen, directed by the first person they came across, took the Rue d'Averon, then the Rue Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, and presently found themselves in front of the Louvre, the towers of which were beginning to fade into the darkness of evening.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Coconnas of La Mole, who, stopping at the sight of the ancient castle, was gazing with reverence at its drawbridges, its narrow windows, and its pointed turrets, which suddenly presented themselves to his view.

"Upon my word, I hardly know," said La Mole, "but my heart is beating. I am no more timid than other people, yet somehow this palace strikes me as gloomy and, shall I say, terrifying!"

"Well, for my part," said Coconnas, "I don't know what has come to me, but I feel unusually cheerful. My dress, however, is somewhat untidy," continued he, running over his travelling-costume with his eyes; "but no matter, it is suited to a cavalier. Besides, my orders enjoin promptitude, so I shall be welcome."

And the two young men, each disturbed by the sentiments which he had expressed, continued their road.

The Louvre was well guarded; all the sentries appeared to be doubled. Our two travellers therefore were at first in somewhat of a difficulty. But Coconnas, who had remarked that the name of the Duc de Guise acted on the Parisians as a sort of charm, approached a sentry, and, employing that all-powerful name, asked if, by virtue of it, he might be admitted to the Louvre.

The name appeared to produce on the soldier its usual effect; he asked Coconnas, however, if he could not give the watchword.

Coconnas was obliged to admit that he could not.

"Then keep off, my friend!" said the soldier.

At this moment a man who was talking with an officer of the guard, and had heard Coconnas request admission to the Louvre, broke off his conversation, and, advancing towards him, asked:

"What do you want with Monsir de Gouise?"

"I want to speak to him," answered Coconnas, smiling.

"It is impossible; the Dugue is with the King."

"I have a letter, however, summoning me to Paris."

"Ah! you have a letter?"

"Yes, and I have come a long distance."

"Ah! you have come a long way."

"I have come from Piedmont."

"Very good; that's another matter. And your name is?"

"The Comte Hannibal de Coconnas."

"Very well; give me the letter, Monsir Hannibal."

"Upon my word, a very polite fellow," said La Mole to himself, "can't I find some one like him to take me to the King of Navarre?"

"Well, give me the letter," continued the German, extending his hand towards Coconnas, who showed signs of hesitation.

"Zounds!" replied the Piedmontese, with all the suspicion of a semi-Italian, "I hardly know if I ought to—I have not the honour of your acquaintance, sir."

"I am Pesme; I belong to Monsir, the Dugue of Gouise."

"Pesme," murmured Coconnas, "I don't know the name."

"It is Monsieur de Besme," said the sentry; "you are puzzled by the pronunciation, that is all. You may give him your letter; I will answer for him."

"Ah! Monsieur de Besme," cried Coconnas, "of course I know you—why, of course, with the greatest pleasure. Here is my letter. Forgive my hesitation; but one must be cautious if one wishes to be loyal."

"Quite right," said De Besme, "there is no need for apologies."

"Upon my word, sir," said La Mole, approaching in his turn, "since you are so obliging, would you take charge of my letter as you have done of my friend's?"

"What is your name?"

"Comte Lerac de la Mole."

"Comte Lerac de la Mole?"

"Yes."

"I don't know you."

"That is easily explained, sir. I am a stranger, and, like the Comte de Coconnas, have come a long distance."

"And where have you come from?"

"From Provence."

"With a letter?"

"Yes, with a letter."

"For Monsir de Gouise?"

"No, for his Majesty, the King of Navarre."

"I do not belong to the King of Navarre, Monsir," answered De Besme, with a sudden coldness of manner, "so I cannot take charge of your letter."

And Besme, turning his back on La Mole, entered the Louvre, motioning to Coconnas to follow him. La Mole was left alone.

At that moment a troop of horsemen, numbering about a hundred, issued from a gate parallel to that by which Besme and Coconnas had entered.

"Halloa!" said the sentry to his comrade, "it is De Mouy and his Huguenots; they look delighted. The King must have promised to let them take vengeance on the murderer of the Admiral, and as he is the same man that assassinated De Mouy's father, the son will kill two birds with one stone."

"I beg your pardon," said La Mole, addressing the soldier, "but didn't you say that officer was Monsieur de Mouy?"

"Yes, certainly I did."

"And that those accompanying him were——"

"Heretics—yes, I said so."

"Thank you," said La Mole, without appearing to notice the disparaging term used by the sentry, "that is all I wanted to know."

And at once making towards the leader of the horsemen:—

"Sir," said he, accosting him, "I understand that you are Monsieur de Mouy."

"Yes, sir," replied the officer, politely.

"Your name, so well known among those of the Religion, emboldens me to address you, sir, and ask you to do me a service."

"What is it, sir? But, first of all, to whom have I the honour of speaking?"

"To Comte Lerac de la Mole."

The two young men bowed to each other.

"I am listening to you, sir," said De Mouy.

"Sir, I come from Aix with a letter from M. d'Auriac, the Governor of Provence. It is addressed to the King of Navarre, and contains urgent and important news. How can I convey this letter to him, and how can I get into the Louvre?"

"Nothing easier, sir, than to get into

the Louvre," replied De Mouy, "only I fear that the King of Navarre is too busy at this hour to receive you. But, never mind, if you like to follow me I will take you to his apartments; the rest depends on yourself."

"A thousand thanks."

"Come, sir," said De Mouy.

De Mouy dismounted from his horse, threw the bridle to his lackey, approached the door and spoke to the sentry, then passed La Mole through into the castle, and, opening the door of the King's apartments, observed:

"Enter, sir, and make enquiries for yourself."

And, bowing to La Mole, he withdrew.

La Mole, left alone, looked around him.

The ante-chamber was empty, and one of the inner doors was open.

He took a few steps and found himself in a passage.

He knocked and called, but without getting any answer: the most profound silence reigned in this quarter of the Louvre.

"Who was it who told me," thought he, "of the severe etiquette of the palace? Why, you can come and go as though you were in a public square."

And he called again, with no better result.

"Well," thought he, "I will go straight ahead; I must end by meeting somebody."

And he advanced down the passage, which became darker and darker.

Suddenly a door opposite to the one by which he had entered was opened, and two pages appeared carrying flambeaux, and escorting a woman of imposing stature, majestic mien, and striking beauty.

The light flashed full upon La Mole, who remained motionless.

The woman, on her part, stopped, just as La Mole had done.

"What are you wanting, sir?" she asked the young man in tones that sounded like sweet music to his ears.

"Oh! Madame," said La Mole, lowering his eyes, "forgive me, I beg of you. I have just left M. de Mouy, who was kind enough to show me the way here, and I was looking for the King of Navarre."

"His Majesty is not here, sir; he is, I believe, with his brother-in-law. But

could you not, in his absence tell the Queen?"

"Yes, Madame, no doubt," replied La Mole, "if anyone would be kind enough to conduct me to her presence."

"You are in it, sir."

"What!" cried La Mole.

"I am the Queen of Navarre," said Marguerite.

La Mole made a sudden movement of astonishment and fear, which made the Queen smile.

"Speak quickly, sir," said she, "for the Queen-Mother is waiting for me."

"Oh! Madame, in that case, allow me to go away, for I could not possibly speak to you just now. I cannot collect my thoughts; the sight of you has confused me and I cannot think; I can only admire."

Marguerite advanced in all her graceful beauty towards this young fellow, who, all unconsciously, had acted the part of the practised courtier.

"Compose yourself, sir," said she; "I will stay, and they must wait for me."

"Oh! forgive me, Madame, for not having at once greeted your Majesty with all the respect that you have the right to look for from one of your most humble servants, but——"

"But," continued Marguerite, "you took me for one of my ladies."

"No, Madame, but for the shade of the fair Diane de Poitiers; I am told that she haunts the Louvre."

"Come, sir," said Marguerite, "I see I need not be uneasy about you, you will soon win your way at the Court. You said you had a letter for the King: it was quite unnecessary, but never mind, where is it? I will give it to him . . . but make haste, I beseech you."

La Mole promptly opened the folds of his doublet, and drew from his breast a letter enclosed in a silk envelope.

Marguerite took the letter and looked at the writing.

"Are you not Monsieur de la Mole?" she asked.

"Can I indeed be so fortunate that your Majesty should know my name?"

"I have heard my husband, the King, mention it, and also my brother, the Duc d'Alençon: I know that you have been expected."

And she slipped into the body of her dress, all stiff with embroidery and diamonds, this letter, which had been taken

from the young man's doublet, and was still warm from lying in his breast. La Mole's eyes followed Marguerite's movements greedily.

"Now, sir," she said, "go down to the corridor below, and wait until someone comes to you from the King of Navarre or the Duc d'Alençon: one of my pages will conduct you."

With these words Marguerite moved away. La Mole stood back against the wall. But the passage was so narrow, and the Queen of Navarre's farthingale was so wide, that her silk robe brushed against the young man's coat, and he was conscious of a delightful perfume as she passed him.

La Mole quivered through his whole frame, and feeling as though he were going to fall, leaned against the wall for support.

Marguerite disappeared like a vision.

"Are you coming, sir?" said the page, who had been bidden to conduct him to the lower corridor.

"Oh! yes, yes," cried La Mole excitedly; for, as the page was pointing in the direction in which Marguerite had gone, he hoped that he might catch sight of her again if he made haste.

And in point of fact, on reaching the top of the staircase he perceived her on the landing below, and whether by chance or because she heard the sound of his steps, Marguerite raised her head and he was able to see her once more.

"Oh!" said he, as he followed the page, "she is not a mortal but a goddess; and, as Virgil says:

Et vera incessu patuit dea."

"Well?" asked the page.

"Here I am; I beg your pardon," said La Mole.

The page preceded La Mole, descended to the floor below, opened a first door, and then a second, and stopping on the threshold, observed:

"This is the place where you will have to wait."

La Mole entered the corridor, and the door was closed behind him.

The corridor was empty with the exception of a gentleman who was walking up and down, and who seemed, like La Mole, to be waiting.

The evening was already beginning to cast deep shadows from the vaulted roof, and although the two men were scarcely

twenty paces from each other, they could not distinguish each other's faces. La Mole approached him.

"Great heavens!" he murmured, as he came closer, "why, it is the Comte de Coconnas."

The Piedmontese had already turned round on hearing his step, and was looking at La Mole with equal surprise.

"Zounds!" cried he, "it is M. de la Mole, or the devil take me! Ouf! What am I saying? I am swearing in the King's own palace; but there, it appears that the King swears a deal harder than ever I do, and even in Church. So you have found your way into the Louvre then?"

"Yes, as you see. Did M. de Besme introduce you?"

"Yes, he is a delightful German, is M. de Besme. And who acted as *your* guide?"

"M. de Mouy—I told you that the Huguenots didn't stand badly at the Court at present; and have you met M. de Guise?"

"No, not yet; and you, did you obtain your audience from the King of Navarre?"

"No; but it cannot be long delayed. I was brought here, and told to wait."

"You will see that it is a question of some grand banquet, and that you and I will sit side by side at the feast. Truly, what a singular chance! Fate has wedded us for the last two hours; but what is the matter with you? You seem pre-occupied."

"I!" said La Mole quickly, with a start, for, in point of fact, he remained still dazzled by the vision he had seen, "no, but the place in which we are gives birth in my mind to a whole host of reflections."

"Philosophic ones, no doubt; it is the same with myself. Just when you came in, all my tutor's instructions were recurring to my mind. Monsieur le Comte, do you know Plutarch?"

"Why, of course," said La Mole, smiling, "he is one of my favourite authors."

"Well," continued Coconnas, seriously, "that great writer seems to me not to have been mistaken when he compares the gifts of Nature to bright but ephemeral flowers, while he regards Virtue as a balsamic plant with an imperishable perfume, and as a sovereign remedy for the healing of wounds."

"Do you know Greek, Monsieur de Coconnas?" said La Mole, looking fixedly at his interlocutor.

"No, but my tutor did, and strongly recommended me to discourse on virtue, in case I ever found myself at Court; it looks well, he said. So I warn you that I am ready armed for the subject. By-the-bye, do you feel hungry?"

"No."

"I thought, however, that you hankered after the roast fowl of the *Belle-Etoile*; for my own part, I am dying of starvation."

"Well, then, here is a fine opportunity for utilising your arguments on virtue, and proving your admiration for Plutarch, for that great writer says somewhere or other: *Πρέπον ἐστὶ τὴν μὲν ψυχὴν ὀδύνη, τὸν δὲ γαστέρα λιμῶ ἄσκειν*—'tis well to inure the mind to grief and the stomach to hunger."

"Why! you know Greek, then?" cried Coconnas, with astonishment.

"My word, yes!" answered La Mole, "my tutor taught it me."

"Zounds! Comte, in that case your fortune is assured; you will write poetry with King Charles IX., and talk Greek with Queen Marguerite."

"Not to mention," added La Mole, laughing, "that I can also talk Gasconese with the King of Navarre."

At this moment the door of the corridor, which was next to the King's apartments, opened, a step resounded, and a shadowy figure approached in the darkness. It proved to be that of M. de Besme.

He peered into the young men's faces in order to find which of the two men he wanted, and then motioned to Coconnas to follow him.

Coconnas waved his hand to La Mole.

De Besme led Coconnas to the end of the corridor, opened a door, and they found themselves at the top of a staircase.

Here De Besme stopped, and, looking all round him, both above and below, asked:

"Monsir de Gogonnas, where are you lodging?"

"At the *Belle-Etoile*, Rue de l'Arbre Sec."

"Goot! goot! it is only two steps from here—go back quickly to your inn, and to-night——"

He looked round again.

"Well, to-night?" asked Coconnas.

"Well, come back here to-night with a white cross fastened in your hat. De pass-word will be *Gouise*. Hush! nod a word."

"At what hour am I to come?"

"When you hear de dogzin."

"The dogzin?" asked Coconnas.

"Yes, de dogzin: ding, ding!——"

"Oh! the tocsin?"

"Yes, dat is what I said."

"All right; I will be there," said Coconnas.

And, bowing to De Besme, he went away, saying to himself:

"What the devil does he mean, and what are they going to sound the tocsin for? Never mind! I stick to my opinion that M. de Besme is a charming Teuton. Shall I wait for the Comte de La Mole?——no; he will probably sup with the King of Navarre."

And Coconnas made off towards the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, whither the sign of the *Belle-Etoile* drew him like a magnet. Meanwhile a door in the corridor leading from the apartments of the King of Navarre opened, and a page advanced towards M. de La Mole.

"Are you the Comte de La Mole?" said he.

"I am."

"Where are you lodging?"

"Rue de l'Arbre Sec, at the *Belle-Etoile*."

"Good! It is at the gate of the Louvre. Listen . . . his Majesty sends word that he cannot receive you at this moment; he will perhaps send for you to-night. In any case, if you do not hear from him before to-morrow morning, come to the Louvre."

"But if the sentry refuses me admission?"

"Ah! true . . . the pass-word is *Navarre*; give this word, and all doors will open to you."

"Thanks."

"Wait, sir; I have orders to conduct you to the gate for fear you should lose your way in the Louvre."

"By-the-bye, what about Coconnas?" said La Mole when he found himself outside the palace. "Oh! he will stay to supper with the Duc de Guise."

But on entering the inn, the first person that he saw was Coconnas seated at table with an enormous fried omelette in front of him.

"Ha! ha!" exclaimed Coconnas, with a burst of laughter, "you don't seem to have supped with the King of Navarre any more than I have with M. de Guise."

"No, indeed."

"And do you feel hungry yet?"

"I should think so."

"In spite of Plutarch?"

"Monsieur le Comte," said La Mole, laughing, "Plutarch observes in another place: 'He who has, should share with him who has not.' Will you, for the sake of Plutarch, share your omelette with me, and we will talk of virtue while we are eating it."

"Not I, indeed," said Coconnas, "virtue is all very well when one is at the Louvre and afraid of being overheard, and on an empty stomach. Sit down there and have your supper."

"Come, I see that Fate has decided that we are to be inseparable. Shall you sleep here?"

"I don't know."

"Nor I either."

"At any rate, I know where I shall spend the night."

"Where is that?"

"In the same place where you spend it yourself; that is inevitable."

And both began to laugh as they turned their best attention to Master La Hurière's omelette.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEBT PAID

AND now, if the reader is curious to know why La Mole had not been received by the King of Navarre, why Coconnas had not been able to see M. de Guise, and why both of them, instead of supping at the Louvre on pheasants, partridges, and venison, supped at the *Belle-Etoile* on fried omelette, he must be good enough to go back with us to the old Royal Palace, and follow Queen Marguerite, whom La Mole had lost sight of at the entrance to the grand corridor.

While Marguerite was descending the staircase, the Duc de Guise, whom she had not set eyes on since the night of her wedding, was in the King's closet, from

which another corridor led to the apartments of the Queen-Mother.

Catherine de' Medici was alone, seated near a table, her elbow resting on a half-opened Book of Hours, her head reclining on a hand still remarkably beautiful, thanks to the cosmetics supplied to her by the Florentine, René, who combined the functions of perfumer and poisoner to the Queen-Mother.

Henri II.'s widow was attired in the mourning which she had not laid aside since her husband's death. She was now a woman of about two or three and fifty, who, thanks to the freshness of her full round figure, still preserved the marks of her early beauty. Her apartments, like her dress, were those of a widow: everything, upholstery, walls, furniture, was of a severe character, with the exception that, above a kind of canopy covering a chair of State, in which there was now lying asleep her little pet greyhound, which had been given her by her son-in-law, Henri de Navarre, and had received the mythological name of Phœbé, there was painted in its natural colours a rainbow surrounded by a Greek device suggested to her by King François I.:

Φῶς φέρει ἡδὲ καὶ αἰθρην

which may be thus translated:

Radiance it brings and eke serenity.

Suddenly, and at the moment when the Queen-Mother seemed to be plunged in thought—thought which brought a slow and hesitating smile to her carmine-tinted lips, the door opened, the curtain was raised, and a man appeared with a pale, haggard face, and said:

"Everything is going wrong."

Catherine raised her head, and recognised the Duc de Guise.

"Going wrong!" she cried. "What do you mean, Henri?"

"I mean that the King is more than ever infatuated with his cursed Huguenots, and that if we wait for his leave to execute the great undertaking, we shall wait a long time—perhaps for ever."

"What has happened, then?" asked Catherine, maintaining her habitual calmness of expression, to which, however, she knew so well how to give a different appearance when occasion required.

"Why, just now, for the twentieth time, I asked his Majesty the question

whether he would continue to put up with the bravado in which the Protestants have indulged since their Admiral was wounded."

"And what did my son reply?" asked Catherine.

"He replied: 'You, Duc, cannot help being suspected by the people as the instigator of the murder of my second father, the Admiral; defend yourself as you please. For myself, I shall know how to protect myself if I am insulted.' And with that he turned his back on me in order to feed his dogs."

"And you did not attempt to detain him?"

"Yes, but he answered me with that voice of his which you know so well, looking at me with that expression which only he can assume: 'Duke, my dogs are hungry, and I will not keep them waiting for any man.' And so I came to warn you."

"You were quite right," said the Queen-Mother."

"But how are we to act?"

"We must make a final effort."

"And who will undertake it?"

"I will. Is the King alone?"

"No; M. de Tavannes is with him."

"Wait for me here, then; or, rather, follow me presently."

Catherine at once rose and proceeded to the King's rooms, where his favourite greyhounds were reposing on Turkey carpets and velvet cushions. Upon perches fastened to the wall were two or three choice falcons and a little shrike, with which Charles amused himself by catching small birds in the gardens of the Louvre or of the Tuileries, the building of which had just begun.

On her way the Queen-mother had contrived to impart an expression of grief to her countenance, down which trickled a last, or rather a first, tear.

Noiselessly she approached Charles, who was giving his dogs pieces of cake cut into equal portions.

"My son!" said Catherine, in trembling tones, so well assumed that they made the King start.

"What is the matter, Madame?" he asked, turning quickly.

"I wish to ask your permission, my son, to retire to one of your Castles; it matters little which, provided it be a long way from Paris."

"And for what reason, Madame?"

asked Charles, fixing on his mother that dull eye which at times became so piercing.

"Because I receive fresh insults daily from those of the Religion, because even to-day I have heard you threatened by the Protestants in your own palace, and I don't wish to stand by and witness such things."

"But, mother," said Charles, with an air of conviction, "there has been an attempt to kill their Admiral. Poor people! an infamous murderer had already assassinated their brave M. de Mouy. Death of my life, mother! justice must be done in my kingdom."

"Oh! make your mind easy, my son; justice will not be wanting, for, if you refuse it to them, they will exact it after their fashion; from M. de Guise to-day, from me to-morrow, from you later on."

"Do you think so, Madame?" said Charles, a tone of hesitation for the first time showing itself in his voice.

"Don't you know, my son," replied Catherine, abandoning herself entirely to the violence of her thoughts, "don't you know that it is no longer a question of the deaths of François de Guise or the Admiral, a question of the Protestant or the Catholic religions, but merely of the substitution of the son of Antoine de Bourbon for the son of Henri II.?"

"Come, come, mother, you are relapsing into your usual exaggeration," said the King.

"What do you advise, then, my son?"

"That we should wait, mother. All human wisdom is comprised in that word. The greatest, the bravest, and above all the cleverest man, is he who knows how to wait."

"You may wait, then; but I cannot."

With these words Catherine bowed, and began to move towards the door.

Charles stopped her.

"Well, then, mother, what is to be done?" said he, "for before everything I am just, and I should like everyone to be satisfied with my conduct."

Catherine went up to him.

"Come here, Comte," said she to Tavannes, who was caressing the King's shrike, "and tell the King what you advise."

"Does your Majesty permit me?" asked the Comte.

"Speak, Tavannes, speak."

"What does your Majesty do out hunting when the boar charges?"

"Zounds! sir, I wait for him with my feet firmly planted," said Charles, "and drive my spear into his throat."

"Merely to prevent him from wounding you," added Catherine.

"And to amuse myself," said the King, with a sigh which denoted a courage pushed to ferocity; "but I should not amuse myself by killing my subjects, for, after all, the Huguenots are my subjects just as much as the Catholics."

"Then, sire," said Catherine, "your subjects the Huguenots will act like the boar whose throat has not been pierced by the spear; they will rip up the throne."

"Bah! Madame, do you really think so?" said the King, in a tone that implied that he did not place great faith in his mother's predictions.

"But have you not seen M. de Mouy and his fellows this very day?"

"Yes, for they have only just left me; but has he asked me anything that is not just? He demanded of me the death of the murderer of his father and of the Admiral. Did we not punish Montgommery for the death of your husband, my father, though it was a mere accident?"

"Very well, sire," said Catherine, in a tone of vexation; "let us say no more. Your Majesty is under an Almighty protection which will give you strength, wisdom, and confidence; while I, poor woman, forsaken by God, on account, doubtless, of my sins, I fear and I give way."

With these words Catherine bowed once more, motioning to the Duc de Guise, who had come in meanwhile, to stay and make one final attempt.

Charles followed his mother with his eyes, but this time made no attempt to recall her; then, whistling his hunting-song, began to fondle his hounds.

Suddenly he broke off.

"My mother has a regal spirit," said he; "truly she sticks at nothing. Come, now, deliberately to kill a few score Huguenots for coming to demand justice! Was it not their right, after all?"

"A few score!" muttered the Duc de Guise.

"Ah! you are there, sir?" said the King, affecting to see him for the first time; "yes, a few score, no very great loss, truly! Ah! if some one were to

come and say to me: 'Sire, you shall be rid of all your enemies at a blow, and there shall not one of them be left by this time to-morrow to reproach you with the death of the rest,' ah! in that case, I don't say what I might do!"

"Well, sire?"

"Tavannes," interrupted the King, "You are annoying Margot, put her back on her perch. There is no reason why everyone should fondle her, because she bears my sister's name."

Tavannes put back the shrike on her perch, and amused himself with twisting the ears of a greyhound.

"But, sire," replied the Duc de Guise, "supposing anyone were to say 'Your Majesty shall be rid of all your enemies to-morrow?'"

"By the intercession of what Saint could that miracle be accomplished?"

"Sire, to-day is the twenty-fourth of August, the feast of Saint Bartholomew."

"A fine Saint," said the King, "who allowed himself to be roasted alive!"

"So much the better; the greater his sufferings, the greater his wrath against his executioners."

"And it is you, cousin, who, with your pretty little gold-hilted sword, will kill ten thousand Huguenots here to-morrow! Death of my life! Monsieur de Guise, you are mighty amusing."

And the King burst into a loud laugh—but a laugh so hollow that the room re-echoed it in mournful tones.

"Sire, allow me one single word," pursued the Duke, shuddering involuntarily at the sound of that scarcely human laughter. "A sign from you, and all is in readiness. I have the Swiss Guard, I have eleven hundred gentlemen, the light cavalry, the citizens; your Majesty, on your side, has your guards, your friends, your Catholic nobles . . . We are twenty to one."

"Well, cousin, since you are so strong, why the devil do you come and din this into my ears? Do it without me! . . ."

And the King turned again to his hounds.

At this moment the curtain was raised, and Catherine reappeared.

"All goes well," said she to the Duke, "press him and he will yield."

And the curtain fell again without the King having seen, or at least having shown that he had seen, his mother.

"But at least," said the Duc de Guise,

"I must know that in carrying out my desire I shall be doing what is pleasing to your Majesty."

"Truly, cousin Henri, you hold your knife to my throat, but I shall stand firm; zounds! am I not King?"

"No, sire, not yet; but you shall be if you choose, to-morrow."

"Ah!" continued Charles, "you would kill the King of Navarre then as well, and the Prince de Condé . . . in my Palace of the Louvre!"

Then he added in a scarcely articulate voice:

"I do not say but that . . . *outside* the Palace . . ."

"Sire," exclaimed the Duke, "they are going out this evening to a revel with your brother, the Duc d'Alençon."

"Tavannes," said the King, with admirably acted impatience, "don't you see that you are teasing my hound! Come, Actæon, come here."

And Charles went out without choosing to hear any more, and returned to his chamber, leaving Tavannes and the Duc de Guise in almost as great uncertainty as before.

A scene, however, of a different kind was passing in the presence of Catherine, who, after counselling the Duc de Guise to stand firm, had retired to her room, where she found assembled the persons who usually assisted her in disrobing for bed.

Catherine's face, upon her return, was as joyous as it had been melancholy when she left her room. One by one she dismissed her ladies and courtiers with the most gracious air; presently none remained with her except Marguerite, who, seated on a chest near the open window, was gazing at the sky, absorbed in her own thoughts.

On finding herself alone with her daughter, the Queen-Mother opened her mouth two or three times as if about to speak, but each time some gloomy thought checked the words she was on the point of uttering.

Presently the curtain was raised, and Henri de Navarre appeared.

The little greyhound, which was asleep in the chair, sprang up and rushed to him.

"You here, my son!" said Catherine, starting, "are you supping, then, at the Louvre?"

"No, Madame, we are going to scour

the town this evening with Messieurs d'Alençon and De Condé. I thought I should find them here paying their court to you."

Catherine smiled.

"Oh! you gentlemen!" said she . . . "Men are very lucky in being able to gad about like that; don't you think so, daughter?"

"True," answered Marguerite; "freedom is very sweet."

"Does that mean that I curtail yours, Madame?" said Henri, bowing to his wife.

"No, sir; I am not pitying myself, but the condition of women in general."

"Perhaps you will go and see the Admiral, my son?" said Catherine.

"Yes, possibly."

"Do so; it will look well, and to-morrow you can give me news of him."

"I will go, then, Madame, since you approve of such a step."

"I?" said Catherine, "I approve of nothing. . . . But who is that? Go and see, will you?"

Henri stepped towards the door to execute Catherine's order, but at the same moment the hangings were raised and Madame de Sauve showed her fair head.

"Madame," said she, "it is René the perfumer, whom your Majesty sent for."

Catherine flashed a glance at Henri de Navarre.

The young Prince blushed slightly and almost immediately became alarmingly pale. The name of his mother's murderer had just been pronounced, and feeling that his face betrayed his emotion, he went and leaned out of the window.

The little greyhound gave a howl.

At the same moment two persons entered, one of whom had been announced, while the other did not require that ceremony.

The first was René, the perfumer, who approached Catherine with all the obsequious respect of Florentine tradesmen; he opened a box which he had brought, and all its compartments were seen to be filled with jars and powders.

The second person was Madame de Lorraine, Marguerite's eldest sister. She came in by a small private door, which led to the King's apartments—hoping not to have been observed by Catherine, who, with Madame de Sauve,

was inspecting the box brought by René—and went and sat down, pale and trembling, beside Marguerite, close to whom the King of Navarre was standing with his hand to his forehead, as though trying to recover from some shock that had stupefied him.

At this moment Catherine turned round.

"Daughter," said she to Marguerite, "you can withdraw to your own room: you, my son, can go and amuse yourself in the town."

Marguerite rose, and Henri turned half round.

Madame de Lorraine seized Marguerite's hand.

"Sister," she said in low and rapid tones, "in the name of M. de Guise, who will save you as you saved him, do not leave this room!"

"Eh! what are you saying, Claude?" asked Catherine, turning round.

"Nothing, mother."

"You were whispering to Marguerite."

"Only to wish her good-night, Madame, and to give her a message from the Duchesse de Nevers."

"And where is our beautiful Duchess?"

"With her brother-in-law, M. de Guise."

Catherine looked at them both with a suspicious eye, and exclaimed with a frown:

"Claude, come here."

Claude obeyed, and Catherine seized her hand.

"What did you say to her, you imprudent girl?" she muttered, wringing the girl's hand so hard as to make her cry out.

"Madame," said Henri, who, without hearing the actual words, had lost nothing of what had passed between the Queen and Claude and Marguerite, "Madame," said he to his wife, "may I kiss your hand?"

Marguerite held out a trembling hand.

"What did she say to you?" he asked, as he stooped to kiss her fingers.

"She told me not to go away, and do not you, in heaven's name, go out either!"

As in a flash Henri perceived a whole plot.

"That is not all," said Marguerite; "here is a letter brought by a Provençal gentleman."

"M. de la Mole?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," said he, taking the letter, and thrusting it into his doublet. Leaving his wife, he then went and laid his hand on the Florentine's shoulder.

"Well, Master René! and how goes business?" said he.

"Pretty well, Monseigneur, pretty well," answered the poisoner, with his treacherous smile.

"I should think so," said Henri, "with a man, who like yourself, supplies all the crowned heads of France and all other countries."

"Except the King of Navarre," answered the Florentine, impudently.

"Zounds! Master René, you are right; and yet my mother, who also dealt with you, told me when dying not to forget you. Come to my room to-morrow, or the day after, and bring me some of your best perfumes."

"That will not be a bad idea," said Catherine, smiling, "for people say . . ."

"That I carry an odour with me," replied Henri, with a laugh; "who told you that, mother, was it Margot?"

"No, my son," said Catherine; "it was Madame de Sauve."

At this moment the Duchesse de Lorraine, who, spite of all her efforts, could not restrain herself, burst into sobs.

Henri did not even turn round.

"What is the matter, sister?" cried Marguerite, rushing towards her.

"Nothing, nothing," said Catherine, coming between the two young women: "she has one of those attacks of nerves which Mazille told her to treat with aromatics."

And she grasped her eldest daughter's arm more tightly than before; then, turning towards the younger, she remarked:

"Come, Margot, didn't you hear me ask you to withdraw? If that is not enough, I command you to do so."

"Forgive me, Madame," said Marguerite, who was pale and trembling, "I wish your Majesty good-night."

"And I hope your wish may be granted—good-night."

Marguerite withdrew with tottering steps, vainly endeavouring to catch her husband's eye, who did not even turn in her direction.

A short silence ensued, during which Catherine remained with her eyes fixed on the Duchesse de Lorraine, who, on

her side, did not speak, but looked at her mother with her hands clasped.

Henri, who had his back turned, saw the whole scene reflected in a mirror, pretending to be curling his moustaches with a pomade given him by René.

"And you, Henri," said Catherine, "do you still intend to go out?"

"Ah! yes, true!" cried the King of Navarre. "Upon my word, I forgot that the Duc d'Alençon and the Prince de Condé are waiting for me; I think these wonderful scents must have got into my head and made me lose my memory. *Au revoir*, Madame."

"*Au revoir*: you will bring me news of the Admiral to-morrow, will you not?"

"I will take care to do so. Well, Phœbé, what ails you, lass?"

"Phœbé!" said the Queen-Mother impatiently,

"Call her back, Madame," said the Béarnais, "for she won't let me go out."

The Queen rose, took the little dog by the collar and held her, while Henri went out with face as calm and smiling as though he did not feel at the bottom of his heart that he was carrying his life in his hand.

Directly the Queen-Mother released the dog, it rushed to overtake him, but the door was shut, and the little creature could only push its muzzle beneath the hangings, uttering a prolonged and mournful howl the while.

"Now, Charlotte," said Catherine to Madame de Sauve, "go and fetch M. de Guise and Tavannes, who are in my oratory, and when you have brought them, you can look after the Duchesse de Lorraine, who is suffering from hysterics."

CHAPTER VII

THE NIGHT OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF
AUGUST, 1572

WHEN La Mole and Coconnas had finished their scanty meal—for the fowls of the *Belle-Etoile* existed only on the sign-board—Coconnas spun his chair round, stretched out his legs, leaned his elbow on the table, and, tossing off a final glass of wine, asked:—

"Are you going to bed now at once, Monsieur de la Mole?"

"Upon my word, sir, I should like to go very well, for it is quite possible they will come and rouse me in the night."

"And me too," said Coconnas; "but in that case it seems to me that instead of going to bed and making those who come to fetch us wait, it would be better to call for cards and have a game, and then we should be all ready for them."

"I would gladly accept your proposal, sir, but I have very little money for play, barely a hundred gold crowns in my valise, and what is more, that is all I have in the world. I have got to make my fortune with that."

"A hundred crowns!" cried Coconnas, "and you grumble! Zounds! sir, I possess only six."

"Oh! come," replied La Mole, "I saw you draw from your pocket a purse which appeared to be not only full, but, one might say, almost bursting."

"Ah! but that is to wipe out an old debt that I have to settle with an old friend of my father's whom I suspect to be, like yourself, a bit of a Huguenot. Yes, there are a hundred rose nobles in it," continued Coconnas slapping his pocket, "but they belong to Master Mercandon; my personal fortune is limited, as I have said, to six crowns."

"How can we play, then?"

"Why, that is just the reason why I want to play; besides, an idea has just come into my head."

"What is that?"

"We have both come to Paris with the same object?"

"Yes."

"We have each a powerful patron?"

"Yes."

"You can rely on yours, as I can upon mine?"

"Yes."

"Well! it occurred to me that we might play first for our money, next for the first favour that comes to us, whether from the Court or from our mistress. . ."

"A most brilliant idea!" said La Mole laughing; "but I confess I am not enough of a gambler to risk my whole life on a turn of the cards or the dice, for the first favour which either of us obtains will probably affect our whole lives."

"Well! let us put aside then the first favour from the Court and play for the first favour from our mistress."

"I see but one objection," said La Mole.

"What is that?"

"That I don't possess a mistress."

"Nor I; but I don't expect to be long before I do. I am not so ugly, thank God, as to be without some sort of attraction for women."

"Oh! you will be all right in that respect no doubt, Monsieur de Coconnas; but as I have not the same confidence in my lucky star in matters of love, I believe that to pit my stake against yours would be robbing you. So let us play to the extent of your six crowns, and should you have the misfortune to lose, and should want to continue the game, well, you are a gentleman, and your word will be good for the money."

"All right!" cried Coconnas; "that is speaking to the point; you are right, sir, the word of a gentleman is a guarantee for the money, especially when that gentleman has credit at Court. So be sure I shall not be risking too much in playing against you for the first favour I should happen to obtain."

"Yes, you can lose, no doubt, but I cannot win; for, being of the party of the King of Navarre, I have nothing to expect from the Duc de Guise."

"Ah! you heretic! I scented you out," muttered the landlord from where he sat polishing up his old helmet. And he broke off his work to make the sign of the cross.

"Ah! evidently, then," replied Coconnas, shuffling the cards which the drawer had just brought him, "you belong to? . . ."

"To what?"

"To the Religion."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"Well! and suppose I do," said La Mole, smiling; "have you anything to say against us?"

"Oh! no, thank God; it's all one to me. I have a profound hatred of Protestantism, but I do not hate the Protestants; and besides, it is all the fashion now."

"Yes," replied La Mole, laughing, "witness the shooting of the Admiral. Shall we play at shooting as well?"

"Just as you like," said Coconnas; "so long as we play, it matters little."

"Play, then," said La Mole, picking up his cards and sorting them in his hand.

"Yes, and play boldly; for should I lose a hundred gold crowns like yours,

I should be able to pay up to-morrow morning."

"Fortune will come to you, then, while you are asleep?"

"No, I shall go in search of her."

"Where shall you go? Tell me, and I will go with you."

"To the Louvre."

"Are you returning there to-night?"

"Yes, I have a private appointment with the great Duc de Guise."

While Coconnas had been talking of going in search of fortune at the Louvre, La Hurière had left off furbishing his helmet, and had placed himself behind La Mole's chair in such a way that only Coconnas could see him, and from there he proceeded to make signs which the Piedmontese, absorbed in his play and his conversation, did not observe.

"Well! that's very remarkable!" said La Mole, "and you were right when you said that we were both of us born under the same star. I, too, have an appointment at the Louvre to-night, not with the Duc de Guise, but with the King of Navarre."

"Have you an order?"

"Yes."

"A countersign?"

"No."

"Well, I have one; mine is . . ."

At these words La Hurière made a gesture so expressive, just as the indiscreet Piedmontese raised his head, that Coconnas remained petrified far more by this gesture than by the deal on which he had just lost three crowns. Seeing the astonishment depicted on his opponent's face, La Mole turned round, but saw nothing except the landlord standing behind him with his arms folded, and wearing the helmet which he had seen him rubbing up a moment before.

"What is the matter?" he asked Coconnas.

Coconnas looked at his companion and at the landlord without replying, for he understood nothing of the gestures, which La Hurière was now repeating.

La Hurière saw that he must come to his rescue.

"It is only," said he quickly, "that I am very fond of the game myself, and that as I was coming up to look at the hand with which you have just won, Monsieur caught sight of me in my war-gear, which, worn by a humble citizen, must have surprised him."

"You do look fine, indeed!" exclaimed La Mole, bursting out laughing.

"Why, sir," replied La Hurière, with admirably simulated good-humour, and a deprecating movement of his shoulders expressive of inferiority, "it is true we are not very valorous, and have not a smart appearance. It's all very well for fine gentlemen like yourselves to polish your gilded helmets and fine rapiers, and provided that we mount our guard punctually . . ."

"Ah! so you mount guard, do you?" said La Mole, shuffling the cards in his turn.

"Oh! yes, Monsieur le Comte, I should think so; I am sergeant in a company of citizen militia."

And when La Mole was busy dealing out the cards, La Hurière with these words withdrew, putting his finger on his lips to impose discretion on Coconnas, who was more puzzled than ever.

It was this probably that caused him to lose the second deal almost as quickly as he had lost the first.

"Well!" said La Mole, "that makes exactly your six crowns; would you like to stake your revenge on your fortune to come?"

"Willingly," said Coconnas.

"But before pledging yourself further in advance, did you not tell me you had an appointment with M. de Guise?"

Coconnas glanced towards the kitchen, and saw La Hurière repeating the same signal of warning.

"Yes," said he; "but it isn't time yet. Besides, let us talk a bit about yourself, Monsieur de la Mole."

"I think we should do better to talk about the game, my dear Monsieur de Coconnas, for, if I am not much mistaken, I stand to win another six crowns from you."

"Zounds! you are right. I always heard that the Huguenots were lucky at play. I should like to turn Huguenot, devil take me if I shouldn't!"

La Hurière's eyes flashed like coals, but Coconnas, absorbed in his game, did not perceive it.

"Do so, Comte, do so," said La Mole, "and though the call has come to you in somewhat singular fashion, we will make you welcome among us."

Coconnas scratched his ear.

"If I was sure that your luck comes from that," said he, "I warrant you . . .

for, to tell the truth, I don't hold so very much by the Mass, and since the King doesn't hold by it either . . ."

"And then it is such a beautiful faith," said La Mole, "so pure, so simple!"

"And . . . it is so fashionable," said Coconnas, "and . . . it brings luck at cards, for, deuce take it, you get all the aces in the pack, and yet I have watched you all the time and you play a straight game; you don't cheat . . . it must be the Religion . . ."

"You owe me six crowns more," said La Mole, quietly.

"Ah! how you tempt me!" said Coconnas, "and if I should not be pleased with my reception by the Duc de Guise to-night . . ."

"Well?"

"Well! to-morrow I will ask you to present me to the King of Navarre; and make your mind at ease, if once I turn Huguenot. I shall be more Huguenot than Luther, Calvin, Melancthon and all the reformers in the world put together."

"Hush" said La Mole, "you will get into trouble with our host."

"Ah! true," said Coconnas, turning his eyes towards the kitchen. "But no, he is not listening to us; he is too busy just at this moment."

"What is he about?" said La Mole, who could not see him from the place where he sat.

"He is talking to . . . deuce take it, it is he!"

"He! who?"

"Why, that sort of night-bird he was talking to when we arrived—the man with the yellow doublet and drab cloak. Zounds! how excited he is getting. I say, Master La Hurière, do you happen to be discussing politics?"

This time, however, La Hurière replied by a gesture so energetic and imperative that, spite of his love for the cards, Coconnas got up and went to him.

"What is the matter?" asked La Mole.

"You want some wine, sir?" said La Hurière, eagerly grasping Coconnas's hand, "it shall be brought. Grégoire, some wine for these gentlemen!"

Then he whispered in Coconnas's ear:—

"Silence! silence, on your life! and get rid of your companion."

La Hurière was so pale, and the yellow man so gloomy, that Coconnas felt a sort of shudder, and turning to La Mole, said:—

"I beg you to excuse me, dear Monsieur de La Mole; that makes fifty crowns I have lost at a sitting. I am not in the vein this evening, and I am afraid of getting into difficulties."

"Very well, sir, very well, just as you please," said La Mole. "Besides I shan't be sorry to turn in for a bit. Master La Hurière! . . ."

"Monsieur le Comte?"

"If anyone should come for me from the King of Navarre, will you awake me. I shall be dressed and therefore ready in a moment."

"Likemyself," said Coconnas; "and in order not to keep his Highness waiting a single moment, I will prepare my badge. Master La Hurière, a pair of scissors and some white paper."

"Grégoire!" shouted La Hurière, "some white paper to write a letter, and scissors to cut an envelope for it."

"Well! for sure, something unusual is going on here," said Coconnas to himself.

"Good-night! Monsieur de Coconnas," said La Mole. "And you, mine host, be good enough to show me to my room. Good luck, my friend!"

La Mole disappeared up the winding staircase, followed by La Hurière. Instantly the mysterious man in his turn seized Coconnas by the arm, and, drawing him close to him, said in rapid tones:—

"Sir, you have been a hundred times on the point of disclosing a secret on which depends the fate of a kingdom. God willed that your mouth should be closed just in time. A word more and I should have shot you dead. Now that we are happily alone, listen."

"But who are you who speak to me in this tone of command?" asked Coconnas.

"Do you happen to have heard of De Maurevel?"

"The assassin of the Admiral?"

"And of Captain de Mouy."

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I am De Maurevel."

"Oho!" said Coconnas.

"Listen to me then."

"Zounds! I should think I would."

"Hush!" said De Maurevel, putting his finger to his mouth.

At this moment the landlord was heard shutting the door of a room, after which he closed and bolted the door of the corridor, and hurried back to his two companions.

He then offered a chair to Coconnas and one to Maurevel, and taking a third chair for himself, remarked:—

"All is made fast, Monsieur de Maurevel; you can speak."

Eleven o'clock was striking from Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois. Maurevel counted each stroke of the clock as its melancholy clang resounded through the night; then when the last echo had died away:—

"Sir," said he, turning to Coconnas, whose hair almost stood on end at sight of the precautions taken by the two men, "are you a good Catholic?"

"Why, I should think so," answered Coconnas.

"Are you devoted to the King?" continued Maurevel.

"Heart and soul; I think you insult me, sir, by putting such a question."

"We won't quarrel about that; only, you have got to follow us."

"Where to?"

"That is not your concern; you must let us lead you. It is a question of your fortune and perhaps your life."

"I warn you, sir, that at midnight I have business at the Louvre."

"That is just where we are going."

"M. de Guise is expecting me."

"And us too."

"But I have a private pass-word," continued Coconnas, somewhat mortified at sharing with M. de Maurevel and La Hurière the honour of an audience.

"So have we."

"But I have a badge of recognition."

Maurevel smiled, then drew from his doublet a handful of crosses of white material, gave one to Coconnas, one to La Hurière, and took one for himself. La Hurière fastened his to his helmet, Maurevel placed his in his cap.

"Oh! then," said Coconnas in amazement, "the appointment, the pass-word, and the badge are for everybody?"

"Yes, sir; for all good Catholics, that is."

"Then there is some *fête*, some Royal banquet at the Louvre, I suppose," exclaimed Coconnas, "from which those dogs of Huguenots are to be excluded? . . . Good! capital! they've been showing themselves off there quite long enough."

"Oh! yes," said Maurevel, "there is a *fête* at the Louvre, a Royal banquet, and the Huguenots *will* be invited to it. . . . Nay, more, they will be the heroes of the

fête, they will pay for the banquet; and if you will be on our side, we will begin by going to invite their principal champion—their Gideon, so to speak.”

“The Admiral?” exclaimed Coconnas.

“Yes, old Gaspard, whom, like a fool, I missed, though I fired at him with one of the King’s own guns.”

“And that is why I have been rubbing up my helmet, grinding my sword, and sharpening up my knives,” said La Hurière, in a fierce, loud voice, that matched his warlike get-up.

At these words Coconnas shuddered and turned pale; he was beginning to understand.

“What, really!” he cried, “this *fête*, this banquet . . . it is . . . they are going . . .”

“You have been a long while in guessing it, sir,” said Maurevel, “and it is easy to see that you are not as tired as we are of the insolence of these heretics.”

“And you are taking upon yourself to go to the Admiral, and to . . .?”

Maurevel smiled, and drawing Coconnas to the window, said:

“Look; do you see in that small open Square at the end of the street, behind the Church, that body of men mustering silently in the shadow?”

“Yes.”

“The men who compose that body wear a cross in their hats like you and me and Master La Hurière here.”

“Well?”

“Well! That is a company of Swiss from the small cantons, commanded by Toquenot. You know that the gentlemen from the small cantons are the King’s cronies.”

“Indeed?” said Coconnas.

“Now, look at that troop of horsemen passing along the Quay; do you recognise their leader?”

“How could I possibly do so?” said Coconnas, still shuddering; “I only arrived in Paris this evening.”

“Ah! well, that is the man with whom you have the midnight appointment at the Louvre. See, he is going there to wait for you.”

“The Duc de Guise?”

“The same. Those escorting him are Marcel, ex-provost of the merchants, and Choron, the present provost. The two last are going to muster their companies of citizens; and look, there is the Captain

of the Quarter entering the street; watch carefully what he is about to do.”

“He is knocking at all the doors. But what is that on the doors?”

“A white cross, young man; a cross like the one we wear in our hats. In former days it was left to God to distinguish those who were His; to-day we are more civilised, and save Him the trouble.”

“But each door that he knocks at is opened, and armed citizens issue from each house.”

“He will knock at ours as he has done at the others, and we shall go out in our turn.”

“But,” said Coconnas, “all this crowd of people agog to go and kill one old Huguenot! Zounds! it is infamous! it is an affair of cut-throats and not of soldiers!”

“Young man,” said Maurevel, “if you object to old men, you can choose young ones: there will be plenty for all tastes. If you despise daggers, you can use the sword; for the Huguenots are not the people to let their throats be cut without defending themselves, and Huguenots, you know, young and old, die hard.”

“But you are going to kill them all, then?”

“All.”

“By the King’s order?”

“By order of the King and M. de Guise.”

“And when?”

“When you hear the bell of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois.”

“Ah! then that is why that amiable German who is with M. de Guise . . . what is his name?”

“M. de Besme?”

“Exactly: that is why M. de Besme told me to hurry up at the first stroke of the tocsin?”

“Then you have seen M. de Besme?”

“I have seen him and spoken with him.”

“Where was that?”

“At the Louvre. It was he who got me admitted, who gave me the pass-word, who . . .”

“Look.”

“Zounds! it is the man himself.”

“Would you like to speak to him?”

“Upon my word, I shouldn’t mind.”

Maurevel opened the window softly. Besme was just passing by with some score of men.

“*Guise and Lorraine!*” said Maurevel. Besme turned his head, and seeing that

their business was with him, came up to the window.

"Ah! it is you, Monsir de Maurevel."

"Yes, it is I; what are you looking for?"

"I am looking for the hostelry of the *Belle-Etoile*, to warn a certain Monsir Gogonnas."

"Here I am, Monsieur de Besme!" said the young man.

"Ah! goot! you are ready?"

"Yes; what am I to do?"

"What Monsir de Maurefel tells you; he is a goot Catholic."

"You hear?" said Maurevel.

"Yes," answered Coconnas. "But you, Monsieur de Besme, where are you going?"

"I?" said De Besme, laughing.

"Yes, you?"

"Oh! I am going to haf one leetle word wid the Admiral."

"Tell him two, if necessary," said Maurevel, "and say that, this time, if he recovers from the first shot, he won't from the second."

"Be easy, Monsir de Maurefel, be easy, and instruct dat young man well in his duties."

"Yes, yes, never fear; the Coconnas' are fine sleuth-hounds; it runs in the blood."

"Farewell."

"Come on."

"And you?"

"You put up the game, and we shall be in at the death, I warrant."

De Besme went off, and Maurevel shut the window.

"You hear, young man?" said Maurevel, "if you have any private enemy, even if he is not precisely a Huguenot, put him down on your list, and he will pass muster with the rest."

Coconnas, more astonished than ever by all he had seen and heard, looked in turns at his host, who was striking a series of formidable attitudes, and at Maurevel, who was quietly drawing a paper from his pocket.

"Here is my list," said he, "three hundred of them. Let every good Catholic do to-night the tenth part of the work that I shall do, and by to-morrow there won't be a single Heretic left in the Kingdom."

"Hush!" said La Hurière.

"What is it?" exclaimed Coconnas and Maurevel, together.

The first stroke was heard from the belfry of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois.

"The signal!" cried Maurevel. "They have fixed the time earlier, then? It was not to be till midnight, I was told . . . So much the better! when it is a question of the glory of God and of the King, clocks that are too fast are better than those that are too slow."

The mournful note of the church bell continued. Presently a first shot resounded, and almost immediately the gleam of torches illuminated the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec like a flash of lightning.

Coconnas wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his hand.

"It has begun," cried Maurevel, "Forward!"

"One moment, one moment!" said the landlord. "Before we begin the campaign, let us see to the safety of the house; I don't want my wife and children to have their throats cut while I am away. There is a Huguenot here."

"M. de la Mole!" cried Coconnas, with a start.

"Yes! the silly heretic has rushed into the wolf's jaws."

"What!" cried Coconnas, "you would attack your guest?"

"I have sharpened my rapier with that special object."

"Oho!" said the Piedmontese, frowning.

"I have never killed anything but my rabbits and ducks and fowls, so I don't quite know how to set to work to kill a man. Well; I will practise on this one, and, if I am a bit clumsy, at any rate there will be nobody there to laugh at me."

"Zounds! but it's cruel hard," objected Coconnas. "M. de la Mole is my companion; he has supped with me, played cards with me——"

"Yes! but M. de la Mole is a heretic," said Maurevel; "he is condemned, and if we do not kill him, others will."

"Not to mention that he has won fifty crowns from you," said the landlord.

"That is true, but he has won them fairly, I am sure of it," said Coconnas.

"Fairly or not, you have got to pay him all the same, while, if I kill him, you get off paying."

"Come, come, sirs; let us make haste," cried Maurevel. "Let us have at him with a gun, a rapier, a hammer, a poker—anything you please; but get

done with it if you wish to arrive in time to give a hand to M. de Guise with the Admiral, as you promised you would."

Coconnas gave a sigh.

"I'll run and do it," cried La Hurière, "wait for me."

"Zounds!" cried Coconnas, "he will make that poor fellow suffer torments, and perhaps rob him. I should like to be there to finish him off if necessary, and prevent him from being robbed of his money."

And under the influence of this bright idea Coconnas mounted the stairs behind La Hurière, whom he soon overtook; for the higher he mounted, the slower did La Hurière go, doubtless as the result of more mature reflection.

As he reached the door, still followed by Coconnas, several shots resounded in the street. They heard La Mole jump at once from his bed, and the floor creak beneath his weight.

"Deuce take it!" said La Hurière in some anxiety, "I believe he is awake."

"It looks like it," said Coconnas.

"And going to defend himself?"

"Quite likely. I say, Master La Hurière, if he were to kill *you*, it would be funny."

"Hem! hem!" said the landlord.

Knowing himself, however, to be armed with a good arquebus, he gathered his courage together, and burst in the door with a vigorous kick.

La Mole was then seen, fully dressed, though without his hat, intrenched behind his bed, his sword between his teeth, and his pistols in his hand.

"Ho! ho!" said Coconnas, dilating his nostrils, like an animal that scents blood, "this promises to become interesting, Master La Hurière. Come, come, forward!"

"Ah! I am to be murdered, it appears, and by you, you scoundrel!" cried La Mole, with blazing eyes.

La Hurière's sole reply to this address was to lower his gun and take aim. But La Mole had observed the action, and stooping at the moment when the gun went off, the bullet passed over his head.

"Help, help, Monsieur de Coconnas!" cried La Mole.

"Help, help, Monsieur de Maurevel!" cried La Hurière.

"Upon my word! Monsieur de la Mole," said Coconnas, "all that I can do in this business is to remain neutral. It

appears that the Huguenots are to be killed to-night by the King's order. You must get out of it as best you can."

"Traitors! Murderers! Is that it? Well, wait then!"

And La Mole, taking aim in his turn, fired one of his pistols. La Hurière, who had kept his eye on him, had time to throw himself to one side; but Coconnas, not expecting this smart reply, stood firm, and the ball grazed his shoulder.

"Sdeath!" he cried, grinding his teeth, "you have hit me; now it's betwixt us two, as you will have it so."

And, drawing his rapier, he rushed upon La Mole.

Had he been alone, La Mole would no doubt have waited his attack, but behind him was La Hurière reloading his arquebus, not to mention Maurevel, who was mounting the stairs at full speed in answer to the landlord's summons. La Mole therefore dashed into a closet, bolting the door behind him.

"Ah! wretch!" cried Coconnas furiously, beating the door with the hilt of his rapier, "wait, wait. I will give you as many sword-thrusts as you have won crowns from me to-night. I came to prevent your being hacked to pieces and being robbed, and you reward me by putting a bullet through my shoulder. Just wait, you rascal!"

Meanwhile La Hurière came up, and with a blow from the stock of his arquebus, dashed the door to pieces.

Coconnas rushed into the closet, nearly knocking his head against the opposite wall, but the closet was empty and the window open.

"He must have thrown himself out," said the landlord, "and as we are on the fourth floor, he is dead."

"Or else he has escaped by the roof of the next house," said Coconnas, throwing his leg over the window-sill, and preparing to follow him over the sloping and slippery surface.

Maurevel and La Hurière threw themselves upon him, and dragging him back into the room, exclaimed both together:

"Are you mad? You will kill yourself."

"Bah!" said Coconnas, "I am a mountaineer, and accustomed to climb over glaciers. Besides, when a man has once insulted me, I will climb to the sky or go down into hell after him, whatever road he takes. Let me alone."

"Come, come," said Maurevel, "he is either dead or a long way off by this time: come with us, and if this man escapes you, you will find a dozen others to take his place."

"You are right: Death to the Huguenots!" roared Coconnas: "I want my revenge, and the sooner the better."

And all three rushed like an avalanche down the stairs.

"To the Admiral's!" cried Maurevel.

"To the Admiral's!" repeated La Hurière.

"To the Admiral's, then, since you wish it!" said Coconnas in his turn.

All three rushed out of the *Belle-Etoile*, now left in the charge of Grégoire and his fellows, and made for the Admiral's house, situate in the Rue de Béthizy; a bright light and the rattle of muskets guided them in that direction.

"Hallo! who goes there?" cried Coconnas: "a man without scarf or doublet."

"Some one escaping," said Maurevel.

"Shoot, shoot, you who have the guns!" cried Coconnas.

"Not I," said Maurevel; "I keep my powder for bigger game."

"You then, La Hurière!"

"Wait, wait," cried the innkeeper, taking aim.

"Wait, indeed!" cried Coconnas; "and while you are waiting he escapes."

And he dashed off in pursuit of the unfortunate fugitive, whom, as he was already wounded, he would soon have overtaken. But just as he was shouting: "Turn round, turn round, I tell you!" so that he might not strike him from behind, a gun went off, a bullet whistled past Coconnas's ears, and the fugitive rolled over like a hare checked in full career by the ball of the sportsman.

A shout of triumph behind him made Coconnas turn round, and he saw La Hurière flourishing his weapon.

"I've hanelled my gun this time at any rate," he cried.

"Yes, but you nearly pierced me through and through as well."

"Look out, my friend, look out!" shouted La Hurière.

Coconnas sprang backwards. The wounded man had risen on one knee, and, thirsting for revenge, was about to strike the Piedmontese with his dagger, just as the landlord gave him the warning.

"Ah! you viper," cried Coconnas;

and throwing himself upon the wounded man, Coconnas plunged his sword thrice up to the hilt in his breast.

"And now," cried Coconnas, leaving the Huguenot to writhe in the convulsions of his death agony; "now for the Admiral!"

"Ha! ha! my friend," said Maurevel, "you seem to be warming to the work."

"My word, yes," said Coconnas. "I don't know if it is the smell of powder that intoxicates, or the sight of blood that excites me, but 'sdeath, I am taking a liking to butchery. This is a man hunt, as one may say. I have only been at bear-hunts and wolf-hunts up to now, and upon my word of honour man-hunting strikes me as the most diverting sport."

And the three men resumed their way.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VICTIMS

THE house in which the Admiral lived was situated, as we have said, in the Rue de Béthizy. It was a large building at the further end of a courtyard, and had two wings projecting into the street. A large gate, flanked by two smaller ones, gave entrance to this courtyard.

When our three adherents of the Duc de Guise reached the end of the Rue de Béthizy, which is a continuation of the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, they saw the house surrounded by Swiss, by soldiers, and armed citizens; in their right hands were swords or pikes or arquebuses, while some held in their left hands torches which imparted to the scene a funereal and uncertain light, which, following the movement of the crowd, spread along the pavement and climbed along the walls, or flamed over this living sea in which each weapon flashed a reflecting ray. All about the house and in the adjoining streets terrible scenes were being enacted. Long-drawn screams were heard, musketry crackled, and from time to time some half-naked wretch, pale and blood-bespattered, would dash by, bounding like a hunted deer, past the circle of fatal light in which a world of demons seemed to be struggling

In a moment Coconnas, Maurevel, and La Hurière, recognisable from afar by their white crosses, and received with shouts of welcome, were in the centre of this panting crowd, huddled close together like a pack of hounds. Doubtless they would not have been able to make their way through it, but that some of the crowd recognised Maurevel and made way for him. Coconnas and La Hurière slipped through behind him, and all three succeeded in slipping within the courtyard.

In the centre of this courtyard, the three gates of which had been broken in, a man, round whom the assassins respectfully left an empty space, was standing erect with an unsheathed rapier in his hand, and his eyes fixed on a balcony raised some fifteen feet from the ground, and extending in front of the chief windows of the house. This man was stamping impatiently, and occasionally turning round to question those nearest to him.

"Nothing yet," he muttered. "Nobody . . . he must have been warned and has fled. What do you think, Du Gast?"

"Impossible, Monseigneur."

"Why not? Didn't you tell me, a moment before we arrived, that a man without any hat, with a drawn sword in his hand, and running as though he were being pursued, had knocked at the door and had been admitted?"

"Yes, Monseigneur; but M. de Besme arrived almost directly, and the doors were broken in and the house surrounded. The man went in, sure enough; but he certainly can't have got out."

"Hallo!" said Coconnas to La Hurière, "am I mistaken, or isn't that M. de Guise whom I see there?"

"The same, my friend; yes, it is the great Henri de Guise in person, waiting, doubtless, for the Admiral to come out, that he may treat the Admiral as the latter treated his father. Everybody gets his turn, my friend, and it is our turn to-day, God be praised!"

"Hallo! Besme!" cried the powerful voice of the Duke, "isn't it finished yet?"

And with the point of his sword, as impatient as its owner, he struck sparks from the paving-stones.

At this moment were heard shouts within the house, followed by shots, then a loud movement of feet and a sound of clashing weapons, succeeded by a fresh silence.

The Duke made a movement as if to rush into the house.

"Monseigneur, Monseigneur," said Du Gast, coming up and checking him, "your rank bids you stay here and wait."

"You are right, Du Gast; thank you, I will wait; but, in truth, I am dying with impatience and uneasiness. Ah! if he should escape me!"

Suddenly the sound of steps was heard approaching once more . . . the windows of the first floor were lighted up as though the house were on fire.

The window to which the Duke had raised his eyes so often was opened, or, rather, was shattered into fragments; and a man appeared on the balcony with a pale face and a white neck splashed with crimson blood-stains.

"Besme!" cried the Duke, "you at last! well?"

"Dere he is!" answered the German coolly, stooping down and immediately rising as he lifted what seemed to be a considerable weight.

"But the others, where are they?" asked the Duke impatiently.

"De others, dey are polishing off the rest of them."

"And you, what have you done?"

"You shall zee; stand back a leedle."

The Duke stepped back a pace or two.

At this moment the object could be distinguished which Besme was dragging toward him with such powerful effort.

It was the body of an old man.

He lifted it above the edge of the balcony, balanced it a moment in the air and threw it at his master's feet.

The dull thud of the falling body and the streams of blood that spirted from it sprinkling the pavement far and wide, struck even the Duke himself with horror, but this feeling was of short duration, and curiosity made everyone step forward, while the light of a torch flickered over the victim.

Then could be seen a white beard, a venerable face, and hands stiffened in death.

"The Admiral!" shouted twenty voices at once, relapsing instantly into silence.

"Yes, the Admiral: it is he, sure enough," said the Duke, approaching the corpse to contemplate it with silent joy.

"The Admiral! the Admiral!" repeated in awed tones all the witnesses of this terrible scene, pressing closely against

one another as they timidly approached this grand old hero now laid low.

"Ah! there you lie, then, Gaspard!" said the Duke de Guise triumphantly; "you were my father's murderer; he is now avenged."

And he had the audacity to place his foot upon the breast of the heroic Protestant.

But at this act of sacrilege the eyes of the dying man immediately opened with an effort; his bleeding and mangled hand contracted for the last time, and the Admiral, in sepulchral tones, uttered these words:—

"Henri de Guise, one day you too shall feel on your breast the foot of the assassin. It was not I who slew your father. With my dying breath I curse you."

The Duke, pale and trembling in spite of himself, felt an icy shudder run through his whole frame; he passed his hand across his brow as though to avert the dismal spectacle; when he let it fall again and ventured to turn his eyes on the Admiral once more, he saw that his eyes were closed, his fingers had relaxed, and a dark stream of blood had flowed over his white beard from the mouth that had just uttered these terrible words.

The Duke raised his sword with a gesture at once of determination and despair.

"Well! Monsir," said Besme, "are you satisfied?"

"Yes, my friend, yes," replied Henri, "for you have avenged . . ."

"De Duc François, have I not?"

"The Religion," replied Henri, in a hollow voice. "And now," he continued, turning to the Swiss, and the soldiers and citizens who were blocking up the courtyard and the street, "now, my friends, to work!"

"Ah! good day, Monsieur de Besme," Coconnas now observed, approaching with a certain admiration the German, who, still standing on the balcony, was calmly wiping his sword.

"It was you, then, who finished him off?" cried La Hurière in an ecstasy of delight; "and how did you manage it, my worthy gentleman?"

"Oh! quite zimplly, quite zimplly; on hearing de noise he obened his door, and I ran him drough the body wid my rapier. But dat is not all, I pelief Téligny is wounded; I hear him crying out."

At this moment, indeed, cries of distress, proceeding apparently from a female voice, were heard, and a red glare illuminated one of the wings of the house, while two men were seen rushing in headlong flight, and pursued by a long line of assassins. One of the two was shot down by an arquebus; the other, finding an open window in his path, leapt boldly into the courtyard, without considering the height, or taking any notice of the foes who awaited him below.

"Kill him! kill him!" shouted the assassins on seeing their victim about to escape.

The man rose from the ground and picked up his sword, which, in his fall, had escaped from his hands, lowered his head and charged through the crowd, upsetting three or four of them, and running one through with his sword; then, amid pistol shots and imprecations from the soldiers, furious at having missed him, he passed like lightning in front of Coconnas, who, with a dagger in his hand, was waiting for him at the gate.

"Wounded!" cried the Piedmontese, stabbing him through the arm with his sharp-pointed blade.

"Coward!" replied the fugitive, slashing the face of his enemy with the edge of his sword in default of space to pierce him with its point.

"Ten thousand devils!" yelled Coconnas, "it is Monsieur de la Mole!"

"Monsieur de la Mole!" repeated La Hurière and Maurevel.

"It was he who warned the Admiral!" shouted several of the soldiers.

"Kill him! kill him!" resounded from all sides.

Coconnas, La Hurière, and some ten soldiers dashed off in pursuit of La Mole, who, covered with blood and urged to that pitch of excitement which supplies the last reserve to human strength, sprang along the streets with no other guide, save the instinct of self-preservation. The feet of his foes behind him, and their shouts, spurred him on and seemed to lend him wings. At times a bullet whistled past his ear, causing him suddenly to urge his slackening steps to a fresh rapidity. He no longer breathed, or even panted; his heaving chest emitted a dull hoarse roar that was almost a death-rattle. Mingled blood and sweat trickled from his hair over his face. Presently his doublet grew too

tight for the convulsive beating of his heart, and he tore it open; his sword grew too heavy for his hand, and he threw it away. At times he seemed to be gaining ground, and escaping from his murderers, but at the shouts of the latter, other assassins who found themselves near him, quitted their bloody work elsewhere and joined in the pursuit. Suddenly he perceived the river flowing silently on his left; it seemed to him that, like the stag at bay, it would be an unspeakable joy to plunge into its depths, and the supreme voice of reason alone checked him from doing so. On his right loomed the Louvre, sombre and motionless, but alive with ill-omened noises. Helmets and cuirasses, crossing the draw-bridges, coldly reflected the rays of the moon. La Mole thought of the King of Navarre as he had thought of Coligny; they were his two sole protectors. Summoning up all his strength, he looked at the sky with an inward vow to abjure if he escaped being massacred, made a *détour* which gained him thirty yards on the pursuing pack, struck straight for the Louvre, dashed upon the bridge amid the soldiers, received a fresh dagger-thrust, which glanced along his ribs, and, spite of the shouts of "Kill him! kill him!" which resounded behind and around him, spite of the threatening attitude of the sentries, flew like an arrow into the courtyard, sprang towards the entrance-hall, cleared the stair-case, mounted two floors, recognised a door, and fell against it, beating at it with hands and feet.

"Who is there?" murmured a woman's voice.

"Oh! God! God!" cried La Mole, "they are coming . . . I hear them . . . there they are . . . I see them . . . it is I! . . . I! . . ."

"Who are you?" replied the voice.

La Mole remembered the pass-word.

"Navarre! Navarre!" he cried.

The door opened immediately. La Mole, without seeing or thanking Gillonne, burst into a vestibule, rushed through a corridor and two or three rooms, and finally reached a chamber lighted by a lamp suspended from the ceiling.

In a bed of carved oak, behind velvet curtains embroidered with gold fleurs-de-lys, a woman, half-undressed, was leaning on her arm, opening wide eyes of terror and astonishment.

La Mole rushed towards her.

"Madame!" he cried, "the Huguenots are being butchered; I, too, am being hunted down, and they want to butcher me. Ah! you are the Queen . . . save me."

And he threw himself at her feet, leaving a broad track of blood on the carpet.

Seeing this man kneeling before her, so pale and so exhausted, the Queen of Navarre rose in amazement, concealing her face in her hands, and crying out for help.

"Madame!" said La Mole, with an effort to rise, "in heaven's name do not call, for should any one hear you, I am lost! Murderers are in pursuit of me; they are mounting the stairs; I hear them . . . there they are . . . there they are!"

"Help!" repeated the Queen of Navarre, who was beside herself with terror, "help!"

"Ah! it is you who have killed me!" cried La Mole, in despair. "I could not have thought it possible to die by so beautiful a voice, or so fair a hand!"

At the same instant the door opened, and a pack of men, panting and furious, their faces stained with blood and powder, and armed with arquebuses, swords, and halberds, rushed into the room.

At their head was Coconnas, his red hair bristling, his pale blue eyes inordinately dilated, his cheek gashed by La Mole's sword, which had traced its blood-stained furrow on the flesh; the Piedmontese, in his disfigurement, was a terrible sight to behold.

"Zounds!" cried he, "there he is! Ah! we have got him this time!"

La Mole looked round him for a weapon, but could find none. He glanced at the Queen and saw the deepest pity depicted in her countenance, and realising that she alone could save him, rushed towards her and folded her in his arms.

Coconnas stepped forward and, with the point of his long rapier, pierced his enemy's shoulder once more, and some drops of warm red blood bedewed Marguerite's white and scented sheets.

Marguerite, seeing the blood flow, and feeling a shudder pass through the frame which clasped her, threw herself, together with La Mole, into the passage on the opposite side of the bed; barely in time, for La Mole, whose

strength was quite exhausted, was incapable of escaping or offering any defence. His livid face rested against the Queen's shoulder, his fingers clutched and tore the delicate embroidered cambric, which covered Marguerite's body with billows of gauze.

"Ah! Madame, save me!" he murmured in a dying voice.

It was all that he could say; a deathly mist darkened his eyes, his head sank heavily backward, his arms relaxed their hold, his legs gave way beneath him, and he rolled to the floor in his own blood, dragging down the Queen with him.

Coconnas, excited by the shouts and the scent of blood, maddened by his furious chase, extended his arm towards the recess; a moment more, and his sword would have pierced La Mole to the heart and probably Marguerite at the same time.

At the sight of the naked steel, and perhaps even more at the sight of this brutal insolence, the Daughter of Kings raised herself to her full height and uttered such a cry of terror, rage, and indignation, that the Piedmontese remained petrified by some unknown emotion; it is true that, had this scene been prolonged and confined to the same actors, this emotion would soon have melted like snow in an April sun.

But suddenly a young lad of sixteen or seventeen, dressed in black, his face pale and his hair in disorder, rushed through a door concealed in the wall.

"Wait, my sister, wait," he cried, "I am here!"

"François! François! help!" said Marguerite.

"The Duc d'Alençon!" muttered La Hurière, lowering his arquebus.

"Zounds! a Son of France!" grumbled Coconnas, retreating a step.

The Duc d'Alençon glanced round him. He saw Marguerite with dishevelled hair and lovelier than ever, crouching against the wall and surrounded by men with fury in their eyes, sweat upon their foreheads, and foaming at the mouth.

"Scoundrels!" he cried.

"Save me, brother, they will murder me!"

An angry gleam flashed over the Duke's pale face.

Though he was unarmed, yet, sustained doubtless by the consciousness of

the name he bore, he advanced with clenched fists against Coconnas and his companions, who retreated in terror before the anger that flamed in his eyes.

"Would you assassinate a son of France, then?"

Then, as they continued to retire before him:

"Captain of the Guard, come hither and hang me these brigands."

More alarmed at the sight of this unarmed young prince than he would have been at the sight of a squadron of cavalry, Coconnas had already gained the door. La Hurière flew down the stairs with the agility of a deer, the soldiers hustled and tumbled over one another in their eagerness to escape, and found the door narrow in comparison with their desire to get outside it.

Meanwhile Marguerite had, with an almost mechanical impulse, thrown her damask counterpane over the unconscious La Mole, and had moved away from him.

When the last of the assassins had disappeared, the Duc d'Alençon turned round.

"Sister," he cried, on seeing Marguerite stained with blood, "are you wounded?"

And he advanced towards her with a solicitude that would have done honour to his affection, had not that affection been accused of being greater than was becoming in a brother.

"No, I think not, or if I am, it is but slightly."

"But this blood," said the Duke, running his trembling hands over Marguerite's body, "where does it come from?"

"I don't know. One of those wretches laid hands on me; perhaps he was wounded."

"Laid hands on my sister!" cried the Duke. "Oh! if you had but pointed him out to me, had you told me which he was, had I known where to find him!" . . .

"Hush!" said Marguerite.

"But why?" said François.

"Because if anyone should see you in my chamber at this hour. . ."

"May not a brother visit his sister, Marguerite?"

The Queen bestowed on the Duc d'Alençon such a threatening glance, that the young man stepped backwards.

"Yes, yes, Marguerite," said he, "you are right; I will go back. But you cannot remain alone this terrible night. Would you like me to summon Gillonne?"

"No, no, nobody; go, François, go back by the same way by which you came."

The young prince obeyed, and had scarcely disappeared when Marguerite, hearing a sigh from behind the bed, rushed to the door of the secret passage, and bolted it, then ran to the other door, which she fastened in the same manner, just as a body of archers and soldiers, who were in pursuit of other Huguenots, quartered in the Louvre, swept by like a hurricane at the end of the corridor.

Then, after looking carefully round to see that she was really alone, she went back to the passage by the bed, lifted the damask counterpane which had concealed La Mole from the eyes of the Duc d'Alençon, drew the inert mass with great difficulty into the centre of the room, and, seeing that the unfortunate man still breathed, she sat down, supporting his head on her knees, and dashed water in his face to restore him to consciousness.

Not until then, when the water had removed the mask of dust and blood and powder which concealed the wounded man's face, did Marguerite recognise in him the handsome gentleman who, full of life and hope, had come three or four hours previously to ask protection from the King of Navarre, and had quitted her, dazzled by her beauty, while his own appearance had not failed to leave an impression on the mind of the Queen.

Marguerite uttered a cry of alarm, for now she not only pitied, but was interested in the wounded man, who, in point of fact, was no longer a mere stranger in her eyes, but almost a friend. She washed the remaining blood-stains from his handsome face, now pale, however, and languid from suffering; almost as pale as himself, she placed her hand upon his heart and found that it still beat. She then took a bottle of salts from a table and made him inhale it.

La Mole opened his eyes.

"Great God!" he faltered, "where am I?"

"Saved, saved! fear nothing," said Marguerite.

La Mole, with an effort, glanced at the

Queen, devoured her for an instant with his eyes, and stammered:

"How lovely you are!"

And, as though dazzled, he closed his eyes with a sigh.

Marguerite gave a slight cry. The young man had turned paler, if possible, than before, and for a moment she thought that sigh had been his last.

"Oh! God," said she, "have pity on him."

At this moment there was a loud knocking at the door of the corridor.

Marguerite half rose, supporting La Mole with her hands placed beneath his arms.

"Who is there?" she cried.

"Madame, it is I, the Duchesse de Nevers."

"Henriette!" cried Marguerite. "Oh! there is no danger; it is a friend. Do you hear, sir?"

La Mole, with an effort, rose on one knee.

"Try to support yourself while I go and open the door," said the Queen.

La Mole put his hand to the ground, and succeeded in maintaining his balance.

Marguerite took a step towards the door, but stopped suddenly, shuddering with alarm.

"Ah! you are not alone?" she cried, hearing a sound of weapons.

"No, I have twelve guards with me, sent by my brother-in-law, the Duc de Guise."

"M. de Guise!" murmured La Mole. "Oh! the murderer!"

"Hush, hush! not a word," said Marguerite.

And she looked all round to see where she could conceal the wounded man.

"A dagger, a sword?" murmured La Mole.

"To defend yourself?—it would be useless; did you not hear? They are twelve and you are alone."

"Not to defend myself, but to prevent my falling into their hands alive."

"No, no, I will save you," said Marguerite. "Ah! this closet, come, come!"

La Mole made an effort, and, supported by Marguerite, reached the closet. Marguerite locked the door, and thrusting the key into her box, whispered to him through the panelling:

"Not a sound, not a groan or a sigh, and you are saved."

Then, throwing a cloak over her shoulders, she went and opened her door to her friend, who rushed into her arms.

"Ah!" said she, "no harm has happened to you, Madame?"

"No, none," said Marguerite, drawing the cloak together so as to hide the stains of blood upon her dressing-gown.

"So much the better; but in any case, as the Duc de Guise has given me twelve guards to escort me home, and as I do not need so large a company, I have left six for your Majesty. Half-a-dozen of the Duke's soldiers are worth as much to-night as a whole regiment of the King's guards."

Marguerite did not venture to refuse: she installed her six guards in the corridor, and embraced the Duchess, who, with the other six, returned to the Palace of the Duc de Guise, in which she was living during the absence of her husband.

CHAPTER IX

THE ASSASSINS

COCONNAS had not fled, he had merely retreated. La Hurière had not fled, he had merely rushed away. The one had disappeared in tiger-fashion, the other in wolf-fashion.

Consequently La Hurière had already reached the Place Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois when Coconnas was only coming out of the Louvre.

La Hurière, finding himself alone with his arquebus amid the persons who were rushing past, the whistling bullets and the corpses which were falling from the windows—some of them whole, others in fragments—began to be alarmed, and to endeavour to get back discreetly to his hostelry; but just as he was turning out of the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec by the Rue d'Averon, he fell in with a band of Swiss and light horse—the troop of which Maurevel was the leader.

"Well!" cried the latter, who had christened himself by the name of the King's Butcher, "have you finished already? You are going home, my friend, and what the deuce have you done with our Piedmontese gentleman?"

it would be a pity if any accident has happened to him, for he was doing very well."

"I think he is quite safe," said La Hurière, "and I expect he will join us again presently."

"Where have you come from?"

"From the Louvre, where I must tell you we were received rather rudely."

"By whom?"

"Why, the Duc d'Alençon; isn't he taking part in this business?"

"Monseigneur the Duc d'Alençon takes part in nothing that doesn't affect him personally; propose to him to treat his two elder brothers as Huguenots, and he will join in, always provided that the business can be settled without compromising himself. But aren't you going along with these good people, Master la Hurière?"

"Where are they going?"

"To the Rue Montorgueil; a Huguenot minister of my acquaintance lives there with a wife and six children; it is passing strange how these heretics breed."

"And where are you going yourself?"

"Oh! I have a bit of private business."

"Don't go without *me* then," said a voice that made Maurevel start; "you know the best places, and I should like to have a hand in the work."

"Ah! it is our Piedmontese friend!" said Maurevel.

"It is M. de Coconnas," said La Hurière; "I thought you were following me."

"Plague take it! you scuttled off too fast for that, and besides, I went a little out of my direct road in order to throw into the river a wretched brat that was shouting: 'Down with the Papists, long live the Admiral!' Unfortunately, I believe the little scamp knew how to swim. If you want to drown these confounded heretics, you must pitch 'em into the water like kittens, before they can see."

"You say you have come from the Louvre; did your Huguenot friend take refuge there?" asked Maurevel.

"Yes, he did, confound him!"

"I shot at him just as he was picking up his sword in the Admiral's courtyard, and I don't know how ever it happened, but I missed him."

"Ah! but I didn't miss him," said

Coconnas; "I stuck my blade nearly six inches into his back. Besides, I saw him fall into the arms of Marguerite—zounds! a fine woman that. I confess, however, I should be glad to be quite certain that he is dead, because the fellow seems to me to be of a very vindictive disposition, and he might bear me a grudge for the rest of his life. But didn't you say you were going somewhere or other?"

"Are you anxious to come with me then?"

"'Sdeath! I don't want to remain where I am for ever. I have only killed three or four as yet, and when I get cold my shoulder pains me, so let us get on."

"Captain!" said Maurevel to the leader of the troop, "give me three of your men, and go and settle your minister with the rest."

Three Swiss detached themselves from the main body and joined Maurevel. The two parties, however, marched side by side until they were opposite the Rue Tirechappe; there the Swiss and the light horse took the Rue de la Tonnelerie, while Maurevel, Coconnas, La Hurière, and the three soldiers followed the Rue de la Ferronnerie, went down the Rue Trousse-Vache, and reached the Rue Sainte-Avoye.

"Where the devil are you taking us to?" said Coconnas, who was beginning to tire of this long tramp without any results.

"I am taking you on an expedition at once brilliant and useful. Next after the Admiral, Têligny, and the Huguenot princes, I could offer you nothing better, so be patient. Our business lies in the Rue du Chaume, and we shall be there in a moment."

"Tell me," asked Coconnas, "isn't the Rue du Chaume near the Temple?"

"Yes; why?"

"Because there is a certain Lambert Mercandon, an old creditor of my family, to whom my father has commissioned me to repay a hundred rose nobles, which I am carrying in my pocket for that purpose."

"Well!" said Maurevel, "here is a fine opportunity for getting out of his debt."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, to-day is the day for settling old scores. Is your friend Mercandon a Huguenot?"

"Oho! I understand," said Coconnas; "yes, ten to one he is."

"Hush! we are there."

"What is yonder great house, with its wing abutting on the street?"

"The Hôtel de Guise."

"I could really hardly have missed coming here," said Coconnas, "since I have come to Paris under the patronage of the great Henri. But, my dear fellow, everything is perfectly quiet in this neighbourhood, you can hardly distinguish the sound of firing. You might imagine you were in the country. Deuce take it, if everybody isn't asleep."

In point of fact, the palace of the Duc de Guise presented as peaceful an aspect as on ordinary occasions. All the windows were closed, and a single light shone behind the blind of the chief window of the projecting wing, which had attracted Coconnas's attention on entering the street.

Maurevel stopped a little way beyond the Duke's palace; that is to say, at the corner of the Rue du Petit-Chantier, and the Rue des Quatre-Fils.

"This is the house of the man we are looking for," said he.

"The man *you* are looking for, you mean" . . . said La Hurière.

"We are looking for him, as you have come with me."

"What! this house which seems to be sleeping so peacefully. . ."

"Exactly! You, La Hurière, are to utilise that honest face with which Heaven has endowed you in mistake, by knocking at the door. Hand your arquebus to M. de Coconnas, I can see he has had his eye on it for the last hour. If you are admitted, you will ask if you can speak to M. de Mouy."

"Ha! ha!" said Coconnas, "I understand; it appears that you, too, have a creditor in the neighbourhood of the Temple."

"Exactly," continued Maurevel. "You will go upstairs in the capacity of a Huguenot, and inform De Mouy of all that is going on; he is a brave man, he will come down . . ."

"And once he has come down?" asked La Hurière.

"Once he has come down, I shall beg him to measure swords with me."

"A brave fellow, upon my soul!" said Coconnas, "and I will do exactly the same with Lambert Mercandon;

and if he is too old to accept my challenge, I will fight with one of his sons or his nephews."

La Hurière, without further parley, went and knocked at the door; at his blows, which rang loudly in the silence of the night, the doors of the Hôtel de Guise opened, and several heads were thrust out; you saw then that the palace was quiet and peaceful after the fashion of fortresses, that is to say, because it was full of soldiers.

The heads disappeared almost immediately, guessing, no doubt, what was afoot.

"Does your M. de Mouy live there, then?" said Coconnas, pointing to the house at which La Hurière continued to knock.

"No, it is the house of his mistress."

"Zounds! what an opportunity for showing his gallantry you are giving him, to let him draw his sword beneath the eyes of his fair lady! Then we shall be merely the judges of the combat. I should be glad enough, however, to do some fighting myself; my shoulder is smarting badly."

"And your face?" asked Maurevel; "it is pretty well knocked about, too."

Coconnas uttered a kind of roar.

"Zounds!" said he, "I hope he is dead; if not, I will go back to the Louvre to finish him off."

La Hurière was still knocking. Presently a window opened on the first floor, and a man appeared on the balcony in a night-cap and a pair of drawers, and unarmed.

"Who is there?" he shouted.

Maurevel signed to the Swiss, who concealed themselves round a corner, while Maurevel flattened himself against the wall.

"Ah! Monsieur de Mouy, is that you?" said the landlord, in a wheedling tone.

"Yes, it is I; what do you want?"

"Why! Monsieur," continued La Hurière, "don't you know what is going on? The Admiral has been butchered, and the Protestants are being massacred; come to the rescue, and quick."

"Ah!" cried De Mouy, "I suspected that something was brewing for to-night. I ought not to have deserted my brave comrades. Here I am, my friend; wait a moment."

And without shutting the window, through which could be heard the cries

of a frightened woman raised in affectionate entreaty, M. de Mouy hunted for his doublet, his cloak, and weapons.

"He is coming down!" cried Maurevel, pale with delight. "Attention there!" he whispered to the Swiss.

"Here, La Hurière," he added to the landlord, who had retreated to join the soldiers, "take your arquebus again."

"'Sdeath!" cried Coconnas, "here is the moon coming from behind a cloud to witness this fine encounter. I would give a good deal if Lambert Mercandon were here to act as second to M. de Mouy."

"Wait, wait," said Maurevel. "M. de Mouy himself is worth ten men, and the six of us will have all we can do to get rid of him. Advance, you there," continued Maurevel, motioning to the Swiss to steal up to the door, "and strike him when he comes out."

"Oho!" said Coconnas, as he watched these preparations, "it appears that the affair won't take place exactly as I imagined it would."

De Mouy was already heard drawing back the bars. The Swiss had issued from their concealment in order to take up their position by the door. Maurevel and La Hurière were creeping up on tip-toe, while Coconnas, deterred by a remnant of gentlemanly feeling, remained where he was, when the young woman, whose presence they had quite forgotten, appeared on the balcony in her turn and uttered a terrible cry on seeing Maurevel, La Hurière, and the Swiss soldiers.

De Mouy, who had already half-opened the door, stopped.

"Come up again, come up again," shouted the young woman; "I see swords gleaming, and the match of an arquebus; it is a trap."

"Oho!" replied the man's voice, "let us just see what all this means."

And he slammed the door to again, replaced the bars, pushed back the bolt, and went upstairs.

Maurevel's plan of campaign had to be altered as soon as he saw that De Mouy would not come out. The Swiss stationed themselves at the opposite side of the street, and La Hurière waited, arquebus in hand, until the enemy reappeared at the window. He did not have to wait long. De Mouy advanced, holding out two pistols of such formidable length that La Hurière, who was

in the act of taking aim, suddenly reflected that the Huguenot's bullets had no further to travel to reach the street than his own had to reach the balcony.

"Truly," said he to himself, "I may kill this gentleman, but on the other hand the gentleman may kill me at the same moment."

Well, as La Hurière, after all, was a landlord by trade and a soldier only by accident, this reflection determined him to retreat and seek shelter in an angle of the Rue de Braque, at such a distance that it would have been almost impossible for him to be sure, especially at night, of the exact direction his bullet ought to take, so as to hit De Mouy.

De Mouy glanced round him and advanced, though making himself as small as possible, like a man preparing for a duel; but seeing that no shot was fired, he remarked:—

"It seems to me, you, sir, who brought me this news, that you have forgotten your arquebus at my door. Here I am, what do you want?"

"Ha! that's what I call a brave fellow," said Coconnas.

"Well!" continued De Mouy, "friends or foes, whichever you be, don't you see I am waiting?"

Maurevel, La Hurière, and the Swiss, all maintained an embarrassed silence.

Coconnas waited a moment; then, seeing that nobody would maintain the conversation begun by La Hurière and continued by De Mouy, he quitted his place and stepped into the middle of the street; then, holding his hat in his hand:—

"Sir," said he, "we are not here to commit murder, as you might imagine, but to arrange a duel. I have accompanied an enemy of yours who wants to have an encounter with you, so as to settle an old dispute in gallant fashion. 'Sdeath! Monsieur de Maurevel, come forward then, instead of turning your back; the gentleman accepts your challenge."

"Maurevel!" cried De Mouy; "Maurevel, my father's murderer! Maurevel, the King's butcher! Zounds! yes, I accept."

And taking aim at Maurevel, who was about to knock at the Hôtel de Guise, to ask for reinforcements, he pierced his hat with a ball.

Hearing the report of the pistol and the cries of Maurevel, the guards who

had escorted the Duchesse de Nevers home, came out, together with three or four gentlemen followed by their pages, and advanced towards the house of young De Mouy's mistress.

A second shot, fired into the middle of the band, killed the soldier who was nearest to Maurevel; after which De Mouy, being without weapons, or at least his weapons being useless, inasmuch as he had discharged his pistols, and his foes were beyond the reach of his sword, took shelter behind the railings of the balcony.

The windows of the neighbouring houses, however, now began to be opened here and there, and, according to the peaceful or warlike humour of their inhabitants, were either closed again or bristled with muskets and arquebuses.

"Help! my worthy Mercandon!" cried De Mouy, making signals to an old man who, from a window that had just been opened opposite to the Hôtel de Guise, was trying to discover the cause of all this disturbance.

"Did you call, Sire de Mouy?" cried the old man, "is it you they are attacking?"

"They are attacking me, you, and all the Protestants, and, look, there is the proof of it."

De Mouy had, in fact, at this moment seen La Hurière in the act of pointing his arquebus at him. The shot was fired, but the young man had time to duck, and the bullet smashed a pane of glass above his head.

"Mercandon!" cried Coconnas, who was so delighted at the sight of this fray, that he had forgotten his creditor, but was now reminded of him by De Mouy's words; "Mercandon, Rue de Chaume, yes, that's it! So that is where he lives. Good! we shall each have our own man to deal with now."

And while the people from the Hôtel de Guise were breaking in the doors of De Mouy's house; while Maurevel was trying to set fire to the building with a torch; while, once the doors had given way, a terrible conflict ensued against a single man, who, with each stroke of his rapier, accounted for one of his foes—Coconnas was trying, by means of a paving-stone, to break in Mercandon's door, who, without paying any heed to this solitary effort, was firing out of his window as fast as he could re-load his weapon.

The whole neighbourhood, hitherto so dark and deserted, became lighted up as though it were broad daylight, and thronged as though it were the inside of an ant-hill; for six or eight gentlemen with their friends and servants, issuing from the Hôtel de Montmorency, had just made a furious charge, and, with the support of the firing from the windows, were beginning to make Maurevel and his men, as well as those from the Hôtel de Guise, retreat, and ended by driving them to bay at the house from which they had come out.

Coconnas, who had not yet succeeded in bursting in Mercandon's door, though he went at it with all his might, was driven back along with the rest. He now set his back against the wall, grasped his sword, and began, not merely to defend himself, but also to attack, with cries so terrible, that his voice dominated the whole *mêlée*. He thrust about him to right and left, striking both friends and foes, until he had cleared a wide space all round him. In proportion as his rapier pierced breast after breast, and the warm blood bespattered his hands and face, so did he, with flashing eyes, dilated nostrils and clenched teeth, regain the lost ground, and approach the besieged house.

De Mouy, after a terrible struggle on the stairs and in the hall, had fought his way, in truly heroic fashion, out of his burning house. Amid all the strife he had not ceased to shout: "Maurevel! Maurevel! here! where are you?" hurling at him all the while the most insulting and abusive epithets. At last he appeared in the street, holding in his arms his mistress, half-dressed and almost unconscious, and with a dagger between his teeth. His sword flashed as it whirled about his head, describing white or red circles, according as the moon silvered its blade or a torch illumined the blood which stained it. Maurevel had fled. La Hurière, driven back by De Mouy into the arms of Coconnas, who, not recognising him, received him on the point of his sword, demanded quarter from both sides. At this moment Mercandon perceived him, and recognised him by his white scarf as one of the assassins.

The shot was fired. La Hurière, flinging up his arms, dropped his arquebus, and after trying vainly to grasp the

wall for support, fell face forward on the ground.

De Mouy profiting by this opportunity, dashed into the Rue de Paradis and disappeared.

The resistance made by the Huguenots had been so vigorous, that the people from the Hôtel de Guise, finding themselves driven back, had returned to the palace and closed the doors, fearing the house might be attacked and taken by assault.

Coconnas, excited by the blood and the uproar, and having reached the pitch when, with Southerners especially, courage is transformed into frenzy, had neither seen nor heard anything. He merely noticed that the din in his ears grew less, that his hands and face were drying a little, and, lowering the point of his sword, saw nothing near him but a man stretched on the ground his face deluged by a red stream, and the houses around him in flames.

The truce was of short duration, for just as he was approaching the man, whom he thought he recognised as La Hurière, the door of the house which he had vainly endeavoured to burst in opened, and old Mercandon, followed by his son and two nephews, rushed out upon the Piedmontese, who was just recovering his breath.

"There he is! there he is!" they all shouted simultaneously.

Coconnas was in the middle of the street, and, fearing he might be surrounded and attacked by all four at once, sprang backwards with the agility of the chamois which he had so often hunted in the mountains, and set his back against the wall of the Hôtel de Guise. His mind once easy against surprise, he stood on guard and began to jeer at his assailants.

"Halloa! Father Mercandon," said he, "don't you recognise me?"

"On the contrary, I recognise you only too well, you scoundrel!" cried the old Huguenot. "You want to do me a mischief—me, your father's friend and comrade!"

"And his creditor, aren't you?"

"Yes, his creditor, since you mention it yourself."

"Well! exactly so," answered Coconnas. "I have come to settle our account."

"Let us seize and bind him," said the

old man to the others, who, in obedience to his suggestion, rushed towards the wall.

"One moment," said Coconnas, laughing. "In order to arrest me you require a warrant, and you have forgotten to apply to the Provost for one."

With these words he turned his sword against the young man nearest to him, and at the first disengagement cut open his wrist. The unhappy young fellow retreated with a yell of pain.

"That's one of them!" said Coconnas.

At the same moment the window beneath which Coconnas had sought shelter opened with a creaking noise. Coconnas gave a jump, fearing an attack from that quarter; but, instead of an enemy, he perceived a woman—instead of the murderous weapon that he was preparing to encounter, a bouquet of flowers rolled at his feet.

"Zounds! a woman!" said he.

He saluted the lady with his sword, and stooped to pick up the bouquet.

"Look out, brave Catholic, look out," cried the lady.

Coconnas rose, but not quickly enough to prevent the second nephew's dagger from piercing his cloak and grazing the other shoulder.

The lady gave a piercing shriek.

Coconnas thanked her, and reassured her with the same gesture, then dashed upon the second nephew, who broke away; but at the second pass his foot slipped in the blood. Coconnas sprang upon him with the swiftness of a tiger, and drove his sword through his chest.

"Bravo, bravo!" cried the lady, "I will send you help."

"You need not trouble to do that, Madame," said Coconnas. "Just watch until the end, if the affair interests you, and you will see how Comte Hannibal de Coconnas serves the Huguenots."

At this moment the son of old Mercandon fired a pistol at close range, and Coconnas dropped on one knee.

The lady at the window uttered a cry, but Coconnas got up again; he had dropped only to avoid the bullet, which struck the wall two feet from the fair spectator,

Almost at the same instant a cry of rage came from the window of Mercandon's house, and an old woman who recognised Coconnas for a Catholic by his

cross and white scarf, threw a flower-pot at him, which struck him above the knee.

"Good!" said Coconnas, "one throws me flowers, and the other, pots. If this goes on they will empty the houses."

"Thanks, mother, thanks," shouted the young man.

"Go on, wife, go on!" said old Mercandon, "but take care you don't hit us!"

"Wait, Monsieur de Coconnas, wait," said the lady of the Hôtel de Guise, "I am going to get my folks to fire at their windows."

"Halloa! it's a pandemonium of women, some of whom are for me, and some against!" said Coconnas. "Death of my life! let us get done with it."

The face, indeed, of things had greatly changed, and matters were evidently drawing to a conclusion. To cope with Coconnas, wounded, it is true, but in all the vigour of his four-and-twenty years, skilled in the use of weapons, irritated rather than weakened by the three or four scratches he had received, there now remained only Mercandon and his son. Mercandon, was an old man between sixty and seventy; his son, a youth of from sixteen to eighteen, pale, fair, and fragile, had thrown away his now useless, because unloaded, pistol, and was flourishing with trembling hand a sword but half the length of that of the Piedmontese; the father, armed only with a dagger and an empty arquebus, was calling for succour. An old woman at the window opposite, the young man's mother, held in her hand a piece of marble, which she was preparing to throw. Finally Coconnas, excited on the one side by threats, and on the other by encouragements, proud of his double victory, intoxicated with the smell of blood and powder, his face lighted up by the flames of the burning house, elated by the thought that he was fighting beneath the eyes of a woman whose beauty appeared to him as surpassing as her rank seemed incontestable—Coconnas, like the last of the Horatii, had felt his strength increase two-fold, and, seeing the young man hesitating, sprang towards him and crossed his little sword with his own terrible and blood-stained rapier. Two passes were enough to send it flying from the lad's hands. Seeing this, Mercandon tried to drive Coconnas back so that the projectiles hurled from the window might be more sure of striking him. Coconnas, however,

In order to paralyse this double attack from the old Mercandon, who was trying to pierce him with his dagger, and from the old woman, who was trying to smash his head with the piece of marble, seized his adversary in his arms, and, choking him in his herculean embrace, presented him to all blows like a shield.

"Help! help!" cried the young man, "he is crushing me to death."

And his voice began to be lost in a choking gurgle.

Hereupon Mercandon changed from threats to entreaties.

"Spare him! spare him! Monsieur de Coconnas, he is my only child."

"My son! my son!" cried the mother, "the hope of our old age; do not kill him, sir."

"Don't kill him, indeed!" said Coconnas, bursting out laughing; "what was he going to do to me, then, with his sword and pistol?"

"Sir," continued Mercandon, clasping his hands, "I have in the house a bond signed by your father, I will give it you back; I have ten thousand gold crowns, you shall have them all; you shall have our family jewels, but do not kill him!"

"And I have my love," said the lady of the Hôtel de Guise in a low tone, "and I promise it to you."

Coconnas reflected a moment, then suddenly asked the young man:

"Are you a Huguenot?"

"I am," murmured the youth.

"In that case, you must die!" replied Coconnas, with a frown.

"Die! my poor child!" cried the old man.

And a cry rang from the mother of such grief and despair, that it shook for a moment the fierce determination of the Piedmontese.

"Oh! Madame la Duchesse!" cried the father, turning towards the lady, "intercede for us, and your name shall be included in our prayers night and morning."

"Let him change his Faith, then;" said the lady of the Hôtel de Guise.

"I am a Protestant," insisted the youth.

"Then die," said Coconnas, raising his dagger, "since you will not take the life offered you by that fair mouth."

Mercandon and his wife saw the terrible blade flash like lightning above their son's head.

"My son, my Olivier," shrieked the mother, "abjure . . . abjure!"

"Abjure, dear child!" cried Mercandon, rolling at Coconnas's feet, "do not leave us alone in the world."

"Abjure, all of you together!" cried Coconnas; "three souls and one life for a *Credo*!"

"I agree," said the young man.

"Agreed," cried Mercandon and his wife.

"On your knees, then!" said Coconnas, "and let your son say word by word what I shall dictate to him."

The father was the first to obey.

"I am ready," said the youth, kneeling in his turn.

Coconnas then began to dictate the words of the Creed in Latin. Whether by chance or by design, however, the young Olivier had knelt down close to the spot where his sword had fallen. Scarcely had he spied this weapon within reach of his hand than, without ceasing to repeat the words after Coconnas, he stretched out his arm to grasp it. Coconnas saw the movement though he pretended not to. But, just as the young man touched the hilt of the weapon with his fingers, Coconnas dashed at him and rolled him over.

"Ah! you treacherous young hound!" said he.

And he buried his dagger in his throat.

The youth gave a cry, rose convulsively on one knee and fell back dead.

"Ah! you butcher!" roared Mercandon, "you are killing us in order to rob us of the hundred rose nobles which you owe us."

"Od's life! no," said Coconnas, "and the proof . . ."

As he said this Coconnas threw at the old man's feet the purse which his father had given him on his departure in order to settle the debt with his creditor.

"And the proof," he continued, "is that there is your money."

"And here is your death!" shouted the mother from the window.

"Have a care, Monsieur de Coconnas have a care," said the lady of the Hôtel de Guise.

But before Coconnas could turn his head a heavy mass, hurled through the air, fell right upon the head of the Piedmontese, breaking his sword in his hand and stretching him senseless on the pavement, unable to hear the two-fold cry of

joy and distress which answered each other to right and left.

Mercandon rushed immediately, dagger in hand, upon the unconscious Coconnas. But at this moment the door of the Hôtel de Guise opened, and the old man made off, seeing the gleam of swords and partisans; while the lady whom he had addressed as Madame la Duchesse, her wondrous beauty lighted up by the flames of the conflagration, and blazing with diamonds and jewellery, leaned half out of the window to cry to the men who rushed up, as she pointed to Coconnas:—

"There! there! just opposite me; a gentleman dressed in a red doublet. That's the man, yes, yes, that's the man! . . ."

CHAPTER X

DEATH, MASS, OR BASTILLE

MARGUERITE, as we have said, had closed her door and returned to her room. As she entered it, her heart still beating violently, she saw Gillonne, who was gazing in terror towards the door of the closet, scrutinising the marks of blood sprinkled over the bed, the furniture, and the carpet.

"Oh! Madame!" she cried on perceiving the Queen, "is he dead, then?"

"Silence! Gillonne," said Marguerite in a tone of urgency that indicated the importance of the injunction, and Gillonne was effectually silenced.

Thereupon Marguerite took from her casket a small gold key, opened the door of the closet and pointed with her finger to the young man inside.

La Mole had succeeded in getting up and going to the window. He had discovered a small dagger, such as were carried by women at that time, and had snatched it up on hearing the door open.

"Fear nothing, Monsieur," said Marguerite; "I give you my word, you are in safety."

La Mole fell upon his knees.

"Madame," he cried, "You are more to me than a queen, you are a goddess."

"Do not agitate yourself thus, sir," cried Marguerite, "the blood is still

flowing from your wounds . . . Oh! Gillonne, look how pale he is."

"Come, let us see, where are you wounded?"

"Madame," said La Mole, trying to locate the chief sources of the pain which he felt in all parts of his body, "I think I have received one dagger-wound in the shoulder and another in the breast; the others are not worth troubling about."

"That we shall see," said Marguerite; "bring me my casket of balsams, Gillonne."

Gillonne obeyed, and returned holding in one hand the casket and in the other a silver gilt ewer and some fine Dutch linen.

"Help me to lift him, Gillonne," said the Queen; "the poor man has exhausted his strength in getting up."

"But, Madame," said La Mole, "I am quite ashamed; I really cannot allow you . . ."

"Sir, you must do as I bid you," said Marguerite; "it would be a crime to let yourself die when we can save you."

"Oh!" cried La Mole, "I would rather die than see you, you, the Queen, soil your hands with my unworthy blood . . . never! never!"

And he drew back respectfully.

"Your blood, my gentleman," replied Gillonne with a smile, "why, you haven't scrupled to soil her Majesty's bed and bed chamber finely with it already."

Marguerite drew her cloak across her cambric dressing-gown bespattered with little red spots. This gesture, full of feminine modesty, recalled to La Mole the fact that he had held in his arms and clasped to his breast this Queen, so beautiful and so beloved, and a fugitive blush mantled on his pale cheeks at the thought.

"Madame," he stammered, "can't you hand me over to the care of a surgeon?"

"A Catholic surgeon, I suppose?" asked the Queen in a tone which La Mole understood and which made him start.

"Don't you know," continued the Queen in a tone and with a smile of ineffable sweetness, "that we Daughters of France are brought up to know the value of herbs and to compose balsams? Our duty, from all time, both as women and as queens, has lain in soothing pain; and so we are as good as the best surgeons in the world, so, at least, our flatterers say.

Has my fame in this respect never reached your ears? Come, Gillonne, let us get to work."

La Mole still tried to resist; he repeated once more that he would rather die than impose upon the Queen a task which, begun from pity, might end in disgusting her. This contest merely resulted in exhausting his strength. He staggered, closed his eyes, and fell with his head backwards, swooning away for the second time.

Then Marguerite, seizing the dagger which he had dropped, quickly cut the strings of his doublet, while Gillonne, with another blade, ripped up, or rather cut off his sleeves.

Then Gillonne, with a rag soaked in clean water, stanchd the blood which was trickling from his breast and shoulder, while Marguerite, with a gold, round-pointed needle, probed the wounds with as much skill and delicacy as Master Ambroise Paré himself could have displayed in similar circumstances.

The wound in the shoulder was deep, but that in the breast had merely grazed the ribs and entered the flesh; neither of them had penetrated the cavities of that natural fortress which protects the heart and lungs.

"A severe wound, but not dangerous—*Acervimum humeri vulnus, non autem lethale*," murmured the fair and learned surgeon; "pass me the balsam and get the lint ready, Gillonne."

Gillonne, to whom the Queen had just given this fresh order, had already wiped and perfumed the young man's breast, as well as his finely moulded arms, his shoulders so gracefully set back, and his muscular neck, which seemed to belong rather to a statue of Parian marble than to the mangled body of a dying man.

"Poor young fellow," murmured Gillonne, looking not so much at the result of her work as at the person on whom it had been bestowed.

"Isn't he handsome?" said Marguerite with queenly outspokenness.

"Yes, Madame, but I think that instead of letting him lie on the ground like this we ought to lift him up and place him on this couch against which he is merely leaning."

"Yes, you are right," said Marguerite.

And the two women, stooping down, with their united strength lifted La Mole and placed him on a sort of large divan

with a carved back which extended in front of the window, which they opened half-way so as to give him air.

The movement aroused La Mole, who sighed and opened his eyes. He was beginning to experience that feeling of unspeakable comfort which accompanies the sensations of the wounded man who, on returning to consciousness, finds coolness instead of raging fever, and the scent of balsam instead of the warm and nauseous odour of blood.

He murmured some incoherent words, to which Marguerite answered by a smile and by placing her finger on his mouth.

At this moment were heard several knocks given at a door.

"Someone is knocking at the secret passage," said Marguerite.

"Why, who can be coming, Madame?" said Gillonne in alarm.

"I will go and see," said Marguerite. "Stay here and don't leave him for an instant."

Marguerite entered her chamber, locked the door of the closet, and went to open the door of the passage leading to the apartments of the King and the Queen-Mother.

"Madame de Sauve!" she exclaimed, starting back abruptly and with an expression denoting, if not terror, at least hatred; so true is it that a woman never forgives another for taking from her even a husband who does not love her—"Madame de Sauve!"

"Yes, your Majesty!" she replied, clasping her hands.

"You here, Madame," continued Marguerite with increasing astonishment and in a more imperious tone.

Charlotte fell on her knees. "Forgive me, Madame," said she; "I realise to what extent I have sinned against you, but if you only knew I am not entirely to blame, and an express command from Queen-Mother. . ."

"Rise," said Marguerite, "and as I don't suppose you have come in the hope of justifying yourself in my eyes, tell me why you are here."

"I have come, Madame," said Charlotte still on her knees, and with an expression of alarm on her face, "I have come to ask if he is here."

"Here? who? whom are you speaking of, Madame? . . . I really do not understand."

"Of the King!"

"The King! you actually pursue him into my presence! though you know very well that he does not come here."

"Ah, Madame!" continued the Baronne de Sauve, without replying to this taunt or even appearing to notice it. "Ah! would to God he *were* here!"

"Why?"

"My God, Madame, because they are butchering the Huguenots, and because the King of Navarre is their chief."

"Oh!" cried Marguerite, seizing Madame de Sauve by the hand and forcing her to get up, "I had forgotten it! Besides, I did not dream that a king could run the same risk as the others."

"Greater, Madame, a thousand times greater," cried Charlotte.

"Madame de Lorraine had warned me, as it happens. I told him not to go out. Did he go?"

"No, no, he is in the Louvre. He cannot be found; and if he is not here. . ."

"He is not here."

"Oh!" cried Madame de Sauve, with an outburst of grief, "then it is all over with him, for the Queen-Mother has sworn his death."

"His death!" said Marguerite, "you astound me! It is impossible!"

"Madame," replied De Sauve, with that earnestness which passion alone imparts, "I tell you that the King of Navarre cannot be found."

"And the Queen-Mother, where is she?"

"The Queen-Mother sent me to fetch M. de Guise and M. de Tavannes, who were in her oratory, and then dismissed me. I went upstairs to my room and there—forgive me, Madame, if I hurt you—I waited as usual."

"For my husband, I suppose?" said Marguerite.

"He did not come, Madame, so I looked for him in all directions and inquired of everybody. One soldier told me he thought he had seen him a short while before the massacre began, escorted by a guard of soldiers with drawn swords, but that is more than an hour ago."

"Thank you, Madame," said Marguerite; "I thank you, even though the anxiety you have shown be perhaps a fresh insult to me."

"Oh! Madame, if so, pardon me, and I shall return to my own room cheered by

your forgiveness; for I shall not venture to follow you, even at a distance."

Marguerite offered her hand to her.

"I will go and find Queen Catherine," said she; "return to your room. The King of Navarre is under my protection; I have promised to be his ally, and I will be faithful to my promise."

"But if you cannot gain admittance to the Queen-Mother, Madame?"

"Then I will go to my brother Charles, who cannot refuse me an interview."

"Go then, go, Madame," said Charlotte, stepping back to let Marguerite pass, "and God speed your Majesty."

Marguerite sped down the corridor, but before she reached the further end she turned to make sure that Madame de Sauve was not lingering behind, and saw that she was following her.

The Queen of Navarre saw her ascend the stairs leading to her apartments, and then continued her way to the chamber of the Queen-Mother.

A great transformation had taken place there; instead of the usual crowd of courtiers opening their ranks for her with respectful salutations, Marguerite encountered nothing but guards with blood-stained partisans and garments smeared with blood, or gentlemen in torn cloaks, their faces blackened by powder, carrying orders and despatches, coming and going, and by their hurrying to and fro causing an immense commotion in the corridors.

Marguerite nevertheless persevered, and succeeded in reaching the ante-chamber, only to find it guarded by two lines of soldiers, who allowed no one to pass but those who brought a certain countersign.

Marguerite tried in vain to cross this human barrier. She saw the door open and shut several times, and each time through the open space she perceived Catherine, rejuvenated by action, with all the energy of a woman of twenty, writing letters, receiving and unsealing despatches, giving orders, addressing a word to these, bestowing a smile on those, the men who received the most cordial smile being those who were most begrimed with blood and powder.

Amid this tumult with which the Louvre resounded, and which filled it with alarming rumours, could be heard a never-ceasing rattle of musketry in the street.

"I shall never reach her," said Marguerite to herself, after making three fruitless attempts to pass the line of halberdiers; "rather than waste time here, I will go and find my brother."

At this moment M. de Guise passed by; he had just announced to the Queen the death of the Admiral and was returning to the slaughter.

"Oh! Henri!" cried Marguerite, "where is the King of Navarre?"

The Duke gave a smile of astonishment, bowed, and without replying went out with his guards.

Marguerite ran to a captain who was about to leave the Louvre, and was making his men load their arquebuses before starting.

"The King of Navarre?" she asked; "where is he, sir?"

"I don't know, Madame," he replied; "I am not of His Majesty's guards."

"Ah! my dear René!" cried Marguerite, recognising Catherine's perfumer . . . it is you . . . you have just come from my mother . . . Do you know what has become of my husband?"

"His Majesty is not my friend, Madame . . . you should remember that. It is even said," he added, with what was more like a grinding of the teeth than a smile, "that he dares to tax me with having poisoned his mother with the connivance of Madame Catherine."

"No! no! my good René, don't believe that!" cried Marguerite.

"Oh! it doesn't matter much to me, Madame," said the perfumer; "neither the King of Navarre nor his friends are much to be dreaded at this moment."

And he turned his back upon Marguerite.

"Monsieur de Tavannes, Monsieur de Tavannes, just one word, I implore you!" cried Marguerite. Tavannes, who was passing, stopped. "Where is Henri de Navarre?" asked Marguerite.

"Upon my word," said he aloud, "I believe he is parading the town with Messieurs d'Alençon and de Condé."

Then, speaking so low that only Marguerite could hear, he added:—

"Fair Majesty, if you want to see the man to be in whose shoes I would give my life, go and knock at the door of the King's armoury."

"Oh! thank you, Tavannes," said Marguerite, who had listened only to the

information and had not heard the compliment; "thank you, I will go there."

And as she went, she murmured:—

"I cannot let him perish after what I promised him, and after the way he behaved to me when that ungrateful Henri was hidden in the closet."

Rushing up to the door of the King's apartments, she found them guarded within by two companies of soldiers drawn up round the walls of the several rooms.

"There is no admission to the King's presence," said the officer, stepping forward quickly.

"That surely does not apply to me?" said Marguerite.

"The order is absolute, Madame."

"But I, the Queen of Navarre! his sister!"

"Accept my apologies, Madame, but my orders are peremptory."

And the officer closed the door again.

"Oh! he is lost," cried Marguerite, alarmed by the sight of all those sinister faces, which, when they were not breathing vengeance, expressed stern inflexibility.

"Yes, yes, I understand it all . . . I have been used as a decoy . . . I am the trap in which the Huguenots are being caught and butchered. I *will* get in, if it costs me my life."

And Marguerite began to run like a madwoman along the corridors and galleries, when suddenly, as she passed a small door, she heard a sound of singing in a sweet monotone that was almost mournful. It was a Calvinist hymn chanted by a trembling voice in the neighbouring room.

"My brother's nurse, the good Madelon . . . she is there!" cried Marguerite, tapping her forehead as a sudden thought struck her; "she is there! . . . God of all Christian folk, help me!" And Marguerite, filled with hope, knocked gently at the little door.

To go back to Henri de Navarre. After the warning which Marguerite had given him, after his interview with René and his departure from the Queen-Mother's apartments, which poor little Phœbé, like his good genius, had tried to prevent, Henri de Navarre had met some Catholic gentlemen, who, under pretence of doing him honour, had escorted him back to his quarters, where some twenty Huguenots were waiting for him. These

Huguenots surrounded the young Prince and refused to leave him, feeling a presentiment of coming danger in regard to that fatal night. They had remained together thus without anyone attempting to disturb them. At the first stroke, however, of the bell of Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois, which struck upon their hearts as a funeral knell, Tavannes entered and announced to Henri, amid a death-like silence, that King Charles wished to speak with him.

Nobody attempted or so much as thought of resistance. The floors and galleries and corridors of the Louvre creaked beneath the tread of soldiers, who had been mustered, to the number of some two thousand, in the courtyards without and the apartments within. Henri, after taking leave of his friends, whom he was not to see again, followed Tavannes, who conducted him to a small gallery near the King's apartments, where he left him alone, without weapons and a prey to the deepest misgivings.

The King of Navarre counted two mortal hours thus, minute by minute, listening with increasing terror to the sound of the tocsin and the reports of the arquebuses; seeing, through a glazed grating, by the light of conflagration and the flaming of torches, the fugitives and the assassins rushing past; understanding nothing of these murderous shouts and cries of distress; entertaining no suspicion, in short, spite of all he knew of Charles IX., of the Queen-Mother and the Duc de Guise, as to the horrible tragedy that was being enacted at that very moment.

Henri possessed not so much physical courage as, what is higher still, moral strength; though he feared danger, he faced it smiling; but it was the danger of the battle-field, danger in the open-air and in broad daylight, under the eyes of all, the danger that is accompanied by the shrill music of trumpets and the inspiring roll of drums . . . But here, he was without weapons, shut up all alone in almost total darkness, in which he could scarcely discern either the foe who might creep up stealthily, or the steel that might treacherously pierce his breast. These two hours were, perhaps, the most terrible that he had ever spent.

Just as the tumult was at its height, and Henri was beginning to realise that

in all probability it was a case of organised and premeditated massacre, a Captain came to fetch him, and conducted him along a corridor to the King's apartments. On their approach the door opened and then closed behind them, as if by magic. The Captain then took Henri to the King, who was now in his armoury. When they entered, the King was seated in a great chair, his hands resting on the arms and his head sunk on his breast. At the sound of their approach Charles raised his gloomy brow, on which Henri saw the perspiration standing in heavy drops.

"Good evening, Henriot," said the King roughly; "leave us, La Chastre." The Captain obeyed.

There was a moment of sombre silence, during which Henri glanced round uneasily and saw that he was alone with the King.

Charles IX. suddenly rose. "O's life!" said he, tossing back his fair hair with a rapid gesture and wiping his brow at the same time, "you are glad to find yourself with me, are you not so, Henri?"

"Certainly I am, sire," answered the King of Navarre; "it is always a pleasure to be with your Majesty."

"Better than being down there, eh?" replied Charles, following up his own thoughts rather than replying to Henri's compliment.

"I do not understand, sire."

"Look, then, and you will understand."

With a rapid movement Charles walked, or rather, sprang to the window. Dragging after him his more and more astounded brother-in-law, he pointed out to him the terrible picture of the assassins, who, on the planking of a barge, were butchering and drowning a succession of fresh victims brought to them every minute.

"But, in heaven's name, what is going on to-night?" asked Henri, turning pale.

"To-night, Monsieur," said Charles, "they are ridding me of the Huguenots. Look yonder, do you see above the Hôtel de Bourbon that smoke and flame? That is the Admiral's house which is blazing. You see that body which our good Catholics are dragging along on a torn mattress, it is the body of the Admiral's son-in-law, your friend Téliigny."

"Oh! what does it mean?" cried the King of Navarre, searching vainly

at his side for the hilt of his dagger and trembling with shame and rage, for he felt that he was being mocked and threatened both at once.

"It means," cried Charles, with sudden ferocity and turning ghastly white, "that I will have no more Huguenots round me, do you understand, Henri? Am I King, am I master here?"

"But, your Majesty . . ."

"My Majesty slays and massacres at this moment all who are Huguenots; it is my will and pleasure. Are you a Catholic?" cried Charles, whose anger was gradually rising like a flowing tide.

"Sire," said Henri, "remember your own words: 'What matters the religion of those who serve me well?'"

"Ah!" cried Charles, bursting into a sinister laugh, "remember my words, do you say, Henri! *Verba volant*, as my sister Margot says. And didn't all those," he added, pointing with his finger to the city, "didn't all those also serve me well? Weren't they brave in battle, wise in counsel, ever devoted? They were all useful subjects, but they were Huguenots, and Huguenots I will not put up with!"

But Henri remained speechless.

"There, do you understand me now, Henriot?"

"I understand you, sire."

"Well?"

"Well! sire, I do not see why the King of Navarre should do what so many gentlemen and poorer folk have not done. For I presume that if all these unhappy people are dying, it is because the same proposal has been made to them that your Majesty makes to me, and that they have declined it."

Charles seized the young Prince's arm, and fastened upon him a glance which gradually changed from one of heavy dulness to the gleam of a wild beast's eye.

"Ah! so you suppose," said he, "that I have taken the trouble to offer the Mass to those who are being slaughtered down there?"

"Sire," said Henri, disengaging his arm, "shall not you die in the religion of your forefathers?"

"Slife! yes, and you?"

"I shall do the same, sire," replied Henri.

Charles uttered a bellow of rage, and with trembling hands snatched up his arquebus, which was lying on the table.

Henri, pinned against the tapestry, the sweat of anguish on his brow, yet, thanks to his power of self-control, apparently calm, watched every movement of the angry King like a bird fascinated by a snake.

Charles loaded his arquebus, and stamping with blind fury:—

"Will you have the Mass?" he shouted, flashing the fatal weapon before the other's eyes; but Henri remained dumb.

Charles made the vaulted roofs of the Louvre ring with the most fearful oath ever uttered by lips of man, and from pale grew livid.

"Death, Mass, or Bastille!" he cried, taking aim at the King of Navarre.

"Oh! sire!" cried Henri, "will you kill me, your own brother?"

Henri, with that incomparable adroitness which distinguished him, had evaded the answer demanded by the King; for without a doubt, had that answer been in the negative, he would have been a dead man.

After any violent ebullition of rage a reaction almost immediately sets in, and Charles did not repeat his question, and, after a moment of uncertainty, in which he gave vent to a low growl, he turned to the open window and took aim at a man who was running along the quay opposite.

"I must kill some one," screamed Charles, livid as a corpse, and his eyes suffused with blood, and pulling the trigger, he brought down the man who was running. Henri groaned aloud.

Then, animated by a dreadful zeal, Charles loaded and fired his arquebus without intermission, uttering a shout of delight each time the shot proved fatal.

"It is all up with me," said the King of Navarre to himself, "when he finds nobody else to kill, he will kill me."

"Well! is it done?" suddenly asked a voice behind the two men.

It was Catherine de' Medici, who had entered during the reverberation of the last shot, without being heard.

"No, a thousand thunders of hell!" roared Charles, throwing his arquebus to the other end of the room. . . "No, the obstinate fool . . . he refuses! . . ."

Catherine made no reply. She slowly turned her gaze towards the part of the room where Henri stood as motionless as one of the figures of the tapestry against which he was leaning. Then she turned

an eye on Charles, as much as to say: "Then why is he still alive?"

"He is alive . . . he is alive . . ." stammered Charles, who understood the look perfectly, and answered it with a hesitating voice, "he is alive because he . . . is my kinsman."

Catherine smiled. Henri saw the smile, and recognised that it was Catherine, more than any one else, whom he had to fear.

"Madame," he said to her, "I see clearly that this is all your work, and not that of my brother-in-law, Charles. It was you who conceived the idea of drawing me into a snare, and of making your daughter the bait which should destroy us all. It is you who have separated me from my wife, so that she might be spared the annoyance of seeing me killed before her eyes. . ."

"Yes, but it shall not be so!" cried another breathless and passionate voice, which Henri recognised in an instant, and which made Charles start with surprise, and Catherine with anger.

"Marguerite!" cried Henri.

"Margot!" said Charles.

"My daughter!" faltered Catherine.

"Monsieur," said Marguerite to Henri, "your last words were an accusation against me, and in using them you were at once both right and wrong; right, because, in fact, I am the tool that has been employed to destroy you all; wrong, because I was ignorant that you were going to your death. For myself, Monsieur, I owe my life to chance, to the forgetfulness of my mother, possibly; but the moment I learned your danger, I remembered my duty. Well, the duty of a wife is to share her husband's fortunes. Let them banish you, Monsieur; I follow you into banishment; let them imprison you, I go to prison, too; let them kill you, I die with you."

And she held out her hand, which her husband grasped, if not with love, at least with gratitude.

"Ah! my poor Margot," said Charles, "you would have done much better to tell him to become a Catholic."

"Sire," replied Marguerite with that lofty dignity which was natural to her, "for your own credit do not demand an act of cowardice from a Prince of your own house."

Catherine bestowed a significant glance on Charles.

"Reflect, my brother," cried Marguerite, who understood Catherine's terrible meaning as clearly as did Charles, "reflect that you have made him my husband."

Charles IX., caught between the imperious glance of Catherine and the suppliant look of Marguerite, remained for a moment undecided, but, at last, his good genius carried the day.

"I faith, Madame," said he, stooping to whisper into Catherine's ear, "Margot is right, and Henri is my brother-in-law."

"Yes," replied Catherine, whispering in her turn to her son, "yes, . . . but if he were *not*?"

CHAPTER XI

THE MIRACULOUS HAWTHORN IN THE CEMETERY OF THE HOLY INNOCENTS

ON reaching her apartments, Marguerite sought vainly to divine the words which Catherine had whispered to Charles IX., and which had had the effect of settling that terrible question of life or death under debate at the moment.

She spent a part of the morning in tending La Mole, and the rest in trying to solve the puzzle which her mind was unable to fathom.

The King of Navarre was a prisoner in the Louvre. The Huguenots were being hunted down with ever increasing activity. That terrible night had been succeeded by a day of still more hideous massacre. The bells no longer sounded the tocsin, but pealed for *Te Deums*, and their joyous note, resounding amid fire and slaughter, produced a sadder impression perhaps in broad daylight than that of their fatal knelling in the darkness of the preceding night. Nor was this all: a strange portent had occurred; a hawthorn, which had bloomed in spring and shed, as usual, its scented blossoms in the month of June, had burst again into flower during the night, and the Catholics, seeing in that occurrence a miracle which, to the popular mind, showed that God was on their side, were going in procession, headed by crosses and banners, to the Cemetery of the Innocents, where the thorn tree had blossomed. This sign

of the approval of heaven bestowed on the massacre which was being perpetrated had redoubled the ardour of the murderers. And while each street and cross-roads and square of Paris presented a scene of desolation, the Louvre had already served as a common tomb for all the Protestants who were found within its walls when the signal was given. The King of Navarre, the Prince de Condé, and La Mole were the only Huguenots in it who survived.

Reassured with respect to La Mole, whose wounds, as she had declared the evening before, were dangerous, but not mortal, Marguerite was now pre-occupied with one thought only, namely, to save her husband's life, which continued to be threatened. No doubt the first feeling that had engrossed the wife was one of pity for the man to whom, as the Béarnais himself had said, she had just sworn alliance, if not love. But, following upon this sentiment, another of a less innocent nature had penetrated the Queen's heart,

Marguerite was ambitious, and in her marriage with Henri de Bourbon she had seen an almost certain prospect of sharing a throne with him. Navarre, torn on the one side by the Kings of France, on the other by the Kings of Spain, who had succeeded in filching away, bit by bit, half of its territory, Navarre could, if Henri de Bourbon fulfilled the hopes aroused by his courageous behaviour on the rare occasions on which he had drawn the sword, become a genuine kingdom with the French Huguenots for its subjects. Marguerite, thanks to her penetrating and well-instructed mind, had foreseen and calculated all this. In losing Henri, therefore, she would be losing, not only a husband, but a throne.

She was absorbed in these reflections when she heard a knock at the door of the secret corridor. She started, for three persons only made use of that door, namely, the King, the Queen-Mother, and the Duc d'Alençon. She opened the door of the closet a little way, motioned with her finger to Gillonne and La Mole to be silent, and then went to admit her visitor. It was the Duc d'Alençon.

The young Prince had disappeared since the previous evening. At one moment Marguerite had entertained the idea of begging his intercession on behalf of the King of Navarre, but a dreadful thought that occurred to her mind had

checked her. The marriage had been arranged contrary to his wishes. François detested Henri, and had only maintained his neutrality in respect to him because he felt convinced that Henri and his wife had practically remained strangers to each other. Any sign of interest in her husband shown by Marguerite might therefore bring closer to his breast, instead of averting from it, one of the three daggers which threatened him. So Marguerite shuddered on seeing the young Prince more than she would have done had her visitor been King Charles IX., or the Queen-Mother herself. Judging from his appearance, one would not have imagined that anything unusual was taking place in the city or at the Louvre. He was dressed with his customary elegance; his clothes and linen were fragrant with those scents which Charles IX. despised, but of which he and the Duc d'Anjou made such constant use. A trained eye such as Marguerite's, however, could observe that, spite of his being paler than usual, and the fact that his hands, which were as beautiful and well-tended as a woman's, trembled slightly, his inward being was animated by a feeling of joy.

He entered in his customary fashion, and approached his sister to embrace her. But Marguerite, instead of holding out her cheek to him, as she would have done to King Charles or the Duc d'Anjou, bent her head and presented her forehead to him.

The Duc d'Alençon sighed as he put his pale lips to her forehead.

Then, seating himself, he began to relate to his sister the story of that night of horror; the slow and terrible death of the Admiral; the instantaneous death of Téligny, pierced to the heart by a bullet. He dwelt on all the sanguinary details of the scene with that love of blood which was characteristic of him and his two brothers. Marguerite let him talk on. At last, his story told to the end, he fell silent.

"You have not come here merely to tell me this, have you, brother?"

The Duke smiled.

"You have something else to say?"

"No," replied the Duke, "I am waiting."

"For what?"

"Didn't you tell me, dearest Marguerite," replied the Duke, bringing his

chair closer to his sister's, "that your marriage with the King of Navarre was against your own inclination?"

"Yes, no doubt: I knew nothing of the Prince de Béarn when he was proposed as my husband."

"And since you have known him, have you not declared to me that you felt no love for him?"

"I told you so, it is true."

"Was it not your opinion that this marriage would bring you unhappiness?"

"My dear François," said Marguerite, "when a marriage is not the height of happiness, it is generally the height of misery."

"Well, my dear Marguerite, I am waiting, as I said before."

"But what are you waiting for?"

"For you to show tokens of your delight."

"What have I to be delighted at?"

"Why, at the unexpected opportunity which presents itself of regaining your freedom."

"My freedom!" replied Marguerite, who wished to force the Prince to speak out his thoughts without reserve.

"Why, of course, your freedom; you and the King of Navarre will be separated."

"Separated!" said Marguerite, fixing her eyes upon the Duke.

The Duc d'Alençon tried to meet his sister's glance firmly, but presently withdrew his eyes in embarrassment.

"Separated!" repeated Marguerite; "let us look into this closely, brother, for I am very glad that you are making me sift the matter thoroughly; and how do they expect to separate us?"

"Why? Henri is a Huguenot," muttered the Duke.

"No doubt; but he made no secret of his religion, and that fact was known when the marriage was arranged."

"Yes, but how has Henri acted since your marriage, sister?" said the Duke, involuntarily allowing a ray of joy to brighten his features.

"Why, you ought to know that better than anyone else, François, since he has spent his days nearly always in your company, either hunting or at mall or tennis."

"Yes, his days no doubt," replied the Duke; "but what about his nights?"

Marguerite was silent, and it was now her turn to drop her eyes.

"What about his nights?" continued the Duc d'Alençon.

"Well?" asked Marguerite, feeling that it was incumbent upon her to make some reply.

"Well, he has spent them with Madame de Sauve."

"How do you know that?" cried Marguerite.

"I know it because I had an interest in knowing it," replied the young Prince, turning pale and plucking at the embroidery of his sleeves.

Marguerite now began to understand what it was that Catherine had whispered to Charles IX., but she professed to remain in ignorance.

"Why do you tell me this, brother?" she replied, with an air of sadness admirably assumed; "is it to remind me that nobody here loves me or cares about me, neither my natural protector nor the man whom the Church has given me for husband?"

"You are unjust," said the Duc d'Alençon eagerly, drawing his chair still closer to his sister; "I love and protect you."

"Brother," said Marguerite, fixing her glance upon him, "you have something to tell me from the Queen-Mother."

"I! you are mistaken, sister, I swear it; what can make you think that?"

"What makes me think it, is that you have broken off the friendship which attached you to my husband, and have deserted his cause."

"Deserted his cause!" replied the Duke, in great confusion.

"Yes, undoubtedly. Come, François, speak candidly. You have admitted it a dozen times, you two can only raise yourselves or even maintain your positions by mutual support. This alliance . . ."

"Has become impossible, sister," interrupted the Duke.

"Why so?"

"Because the King has designs against your husband—I beg pardon, I am wrong in saying your husband—against Henri de Navarre, I mean. Our mother has divined everything. I joined myself to the Huguenots because I thought they were in favour. But now the Huguenots are being massacred, and in a week there won't be fifty of them left alive in all the Kingdom. I held out the hand of friendship to the King of

Navarre because he was . . . your husband. But now he is your husband no longer. What have you to say to that, you who are not only the most beautiful woman in France, but also the most vigorous mind in the Kingdom?"

"I have this to say," replied Marguerite, "that I know our brother Charles. I saw him yesterday in one of those fits of frenzy, each one of which shortens his life by ten years; these attacks are now, unfortunately, of very frequent occurrence, with the probable result that our brother Charles has not very long to live. Finally, the King of Poland is just dead, and the question of electing a Prince of the royal house of France is much debated; such then being the present circumstances, this is not the moment for deserting allies who, when the struggle comes, can support us by the co-operation of a Nation and the help of a Kingdom."

"But," cried the Duke, "are not you guilty of a greater desertion towards me in preferring a stranger to your own brother?"

"Explain yourself, François; how have I deserted you?"

"You asked the King yesterday to spare the life of the King of Navarre."

"Well?" asked Marguerite, with assumed simplicity.

The Duke rose abruptly, took two or three turns round the room with a bewildered air, and then came and took hold of Marguerite's hand. It was stiff and cold.

"Adieu, sister," said he, "you have chosen not to understand me, so you must blame only yourself for the misfortunes which may happen to you."

Marguerite turned pale, but remained motionless in her place. She allowed the Duke to go without making any effort to recall him, but hardly had he disappeared from sight down the corridor ere he retraced his steps.

"Listen, Marguerite," said he; "I have forgotten to tell you one thing, namely, that at this hour to-morrow the King of Navarre will be dead."

Marguerite uttered a cry, for the thought that she was the instrument of a murder caused her an insurmountable horror.

"And you will not prevent it?" said she; "you will not save your best and most trusty ally?"

"Since yesterday my alliance has been no longer with the King of Navarre."

"With whom, then?"

"With M. de Guise. In destroying the Huguenots, they have made M. de Guise King of the Catholics."

"And it is the son of Henri II. who acknowledges a Duc de Lorraine for his sovereign! . . ."

"It is one of your bad days, Marguerite, and you refuse to understand anything."

"I confess I am trying in vain to read your thoughts."

"Sister, you belong to as great a house as does the Princess de Porcian, and Guise is no more immortal than the King of Navarre. Well! Marguerite, suppose now three things, all of them within the range of possibility: the first is, that Monsieur should be elected King of Poland; the second, that you loved me as I love you. Well! I am King of France, and you . . . and you . . . Queen of the Catholics."

Marguerite hid her face in her hands, amazed at the depth of insight in this young man, whom nobody at the Court ever dreamed of calling a very intelligent person.

"But," she asked, after a moment's silence, "you are not jealous, then, of the Duc de Guise as you are of the King of Navarre?"

"What is done is done," said the Duc d'Alençon, in a hollow voice; "and if I have had cause to be jealous of the Duc de Guise, well, I have been jealous."

"There is only one thing that hinders the success of this fine scheme."

"What is it?"

"That I no longer love the Duc de Guise."

"And whom do you love, then?"

"Nobody."

The Duc d'Alençon looked at Marguerite with the astonishment of one who, in his turn, is at a loss, and quitted the apartment with a sigh, pressing a cold hand upon his forehead, which seemed as if it would burst.

Marguerite remained alone in thought. The situation began to be clearly outlined to her eyes. The King had sanctioned the massacre, Queen Catherine and the Duc de Guise had put it into execution. The two Dukes, De Guise and D'Alençon, were going to combine in order to make the best they could out of it. The death

of the King of Navarre would be a natural consequence of that great catastrophe. She herself would then be left a widow, throneless and powerless, with no other prospect than that of the cloister, where she would not even have the sad consolation of lamenting a husband—who had never been her husband.

She had reached this point when she received a message from Queen Catherine asking if she would not join in an expedition which was to be made by the whole Court to visit the miraculous hawthorn in the Cemetery of the Innocents.

Her first inclination was to refuse to take part in this pilgrimage; but the thought that the expedition might perhaps supply her with an opportunity of learning something fresh in regard to the fate of the King of Navarre decided her. She replied, therefore, that, if a horse were reserved for her, she would willingly accompany their Majesties.

Five minutes later a page came and announced that, if she would come down, the cavalcade was ready to start. Marguerite commended the wounded man to the care of Gillonne, and descended.

The King, the Queen-Mother, Tavan-nes, and the principal Catholics were already on their horses. Marguerite threw a rapid glance over this group, which was composed of about twenty persons. The King of Navarre was not among them.

Madame de Sauve, however, was there; they exchanged glances, and Marguerite understood that her husband's mistress had something which she wished to say to her.

The cavalcade started, and reached the Rue Saint-Honoré by way of the Rue de l'Astruce. At sight of the King, Queen Catherine, and the leaders of the Catholic party, the people rushed together, following the *cortège* like a rising tide with shouts of: "Long live the King! hurrah for the Mass! death to the Huguenots!"

These cries were accompanied by the brandishing of reddened swords and smoking arquebuses, which clearly pointed to the share which each individual had taken in the sinister event that had just been accomplished.

On arriving opposite the Rue de Prouvelles, they met some men dragging along a headless corpse. It was that of the Admiral, and they were going to hang it

up by the feet from the great gallows at Montfaucon.

The cavalcade entered the cemetery of the Holy Innocents by the gate opposite to the Rue des Chaps, called to-day the Rue des Déchargeurs. The clergy, who had been warned of the visit of the King and the Queen-Mother, were awaiting their Majesties in order to deliver an address.

Madame de Sauve took advantage of the moment when Catherine was listening to the complimentary speech addressed to her, and approached the Queen of Navarre, asking permission to kiss her hand. Marguerite held out her hand, and Madame de Sauve, as she kissed it, slipped into her sleeve a small piece of paper folded up.

Quick and artful as Madame de Sauve's withdrawal had been, it had not escaped the notice of Catherine, who turned round just as her Maid-of-Honour was kissing the Queen's hand.

The two women encountered that penetrating gaze without betraying any emotion. Presently Madame de Sauve left Marguerite's side and resumed her place near Catherine.

After replying to the address in her honour, Catherine smilingly beckoned the Queen of Navarre to her side.

"Well, my child," said the Queen-Mother, in her Italian *patois*, "you appear to be on very friendly terms with Madame de Sauve?"

Marguerite smiled, the most bitter look of which her beautiful face was capable disfiguring her countenance.

"Yes, mother," she answered, "the serpent came and bit my hand."

"Ha! ha!" said Catherine, with a smile, "I believe you are jealous."

"You are mistaken, Madame," replied Marguerite. "I am no more jealous of the King of Navarre than he is in love with me; only I know how to distinguish my friends from my enemies, and I love those who love me, but hate those who hate me. Should I be your daughter, Madame, if I did not?"

Catherine smiled in such a manner as to give Marguerite to understand that, if she had entertained any suspicion, this had now been entirely dissipated.

At that moment, too, the attention of the august assemblage was attracted by some fresh arrivals. The Duc de Guise rode up, escorted by a troop of gentlemen,

still hot from the recent slaughter. They were followed by a litter, richly adorned, which drew up opposite the King.

"The Duchesse de Nevers!" cried Charles IX. "See, let her come and receive our congratulations, this fair and faithful Catholic. They tell me, cousin, that you shot at the Huguenots from your own windows, and killed one of them with a stone."

The Duchesse de Nevers blushed deeply.

"Sire," she said in a low tone, falling on her knees before the King, "on the contrary, it was a wounded Catholic whom I had the honour to take in."

"Well, well, cousin, there are two ways of serving me; one by exterminating my enemies, and the other by succouring my friends. You did what you could, and I am sure you would have done more, had it been possible."

Meanwhile the crowd, seeing the harmony that prevailed between the house of Lorraine and Charles IX., shouted with all their might: "Long live the King! long live the Duc de Guise! Hurrah for the Mass!"

"Do you return to the Louvre with us, Henriette?" said the Queen-Mother to the fair Duchess.

Marguerite touched her friend's elbow, who understood the signal at once, and answered:

"No, Madame, unless your Majesty commands me to do so, for I have some business in the city with her Majesty the Queen of Navarre."

"And what are you two going to do together?" asked Catherine.

"We are going to see some very rare and curious Greek books which were found in the house of an old Protestant pastor, and which have been transferred to the tower of St.-Jacques-la-Bouche," replied Marguerite.

"You would do better to go and see them throw the last of the Huguenots from the top of the Pont des Meuniers into the Seine," said Charles. "It is the duty of all good Frenchmen to be there."

"We will go, if it is your Majesty's wish," said the Duchess de Nevers.

Catherine glanced suspiciously at the two younger women. Marguerite, who was on the watch, caught the look, and, turning round at once with a very pre-occupied air, looked anxiously about her.

This anxiety, real or pretended, did not escape Catherine.

"Whom are you looking for?"

"I am looking for. . . I don't see her here any longer," she said.

"Whom don't you see?"

"Madame de Sauve," said Marguerite. "Has she returned to the Louvre?"

"Didn't I tell you that you were jealous?" whispered Catherine to her daughter. "O *bestia*! . . . Come, Henriette!" she continued, with a shrug of her shoulders, "take the Queen of Navarre with you."

Marguerite still pretended to be looking around her; then, whispering in her turn to her friend:

"Take me away quickly," she said. "I have things of the utmost importance to tell you."

The Duchess curtsied to Charles and Catherine; then, bowing to the Queen of Navarre:

"Will your Majesty condescend to get into my litter?" she said.

"With pleasure, only you will have to take me back to the Louvre."

"My litter, like myself and my servants, is at your Majesty's orders," replied the Duchess.

Marguerite got into the litter, and signed to the Duchess, who entered it in her turn, and respectfully took the seat in front.

Catherine and her gentlemen returned to the Louvre by the same way as they had come. The Queen-Mother whispered incessantly to the King the whole way, pointing several times to Madame de Sauve.

And each time the King laughed his usual laugh—a laugh more sinister than a threat.

As for Marguerite, when once she felt the litter in motion, and knew that she had nothing more to fear from Catherine's piercing scrutiny, she drew Madame de Sauve's note quickly from her sleeve, and read as follows.

"I have received orders to hand the King of Navarre this evening two keys; one, that of the room in which he is confined; the other, the key of my own room. Once he has entered my room, I am bidden to keep him there until six in the morning. Let your Majesty reflect, let your Majesty decide, let your Majesty account my life as of no value."

"There is no room left for doubt,"

inuttered Marguerite to herself; "and the poor woman is the tool they mean to employ for the ruin of us all. But we shall see . . . we shall see if they can make Queen Margot, as my brother Charles calls me, into a nun so easily."

"Who is your letter from?" asked the Duchesse de Nevers, pointing to the paper which Marguerite had just read through repeatedly with such rapt attention.

"Ah! Duchess; I have a whole host of things to tell you," answered Marguerite, tearing the note into a thousand pieces.

CHAPTER XII

MUTUAL CONFIDENCES

"AND, first of all, where are we going?" asked Marguerite. "Not to the Pont des Meuniers, I fancy? . . . I have seen enough of that sort of work since yesterday!"

"I am taking the liberty of bringing your Majesty . . ."

"In the first place, before everything else, my Majesty wishes you to forget 'your Majesty' . . . You are bringing me, you say . . ."

"To the Hôtel de Guise, unless you decide otherwise."

"Oh! no, Henriette; let us go to your house. The Duc de Guise is not there, nor your husband?"

"No, indeed!" cried the Duchess, with a delight which made her beautiful eyes shine like emeralds; "no! neither my brother-in-law, nor my husband, nor anybody! I am free, free as the air, as the bird, as the cloud . . . Free, your Majesty, do you hear? Do you realise what happiness is comprised in that word 'free'? I come and I go and I give my orders. Ah! my poor Queen, you are not free, and that is why you sigh . . ."

"You come and go and give your orders! Is that all, then? Is freedom useful for nothing else but that? Come, you are too joyful for a person who has got no more than freedom."

"Your Majesty promised to take the lead in the exchange of confidences."

"Your Majesty' again! Come, I shall get angry, Henriette; have you forgotten our agreement?"

"No, that I should be your respectful servant in public, your foolish confidante in private; that was the agreement, was it not, Marguerite?"

"Yes, yes," said the Queen, smiling.

"That we should have neither rivalries of houses nor treachery in love-affairs; that all should be frank and above-board; an alliance, in short, both defensive and offensive, for the sole purpose of finding, and if we find it, of stealing that ephemeral thing called happiness."

"Yes, Duchess, that is it, and, in order to renew the compact, kiss me."

And the two charming heads, the one pale and clouded with sadness, the other fair and frolicsome, met gracefully and joined their lips as they had joined their thoughts.

"There is something fresh then?" asked the Duchess, fixing on Marguerite an eager and inquisitive glance.

"Isn't everything fresh for the last two days?"

"Oh! I am talking of love and not of politics. When we are your mother Catherine's age we can begin to be interested in political matters; but being only twenty, my fair Queen, let us talk of something else. Come, are you married in actual fact?"

"To whom?" said Marguerite, laughing.

"Ah! you quite reassure me"

"Well! Henriette, what reassures you alarms me. Duchess, I must give my husband his rights."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Really, my poor friend! And it is necessary?"

"Absolutely so."

"'Sdeath! as an acquaintance of mine says, this is very sad."

"Do you know somebody who says 'Sdeath,'" asked Marguerite laughing.

"Yes."

"And who is that somebody?"

"You are asking all the questions, when you ought to be answering. Finish, and then I will begin."

"Here it is then in two words: the King of Navarre is in love and doesn't want me. I am *not* in love, but I don't want him. However, we must both alter our minds, or seem to do so, between now and to-morrow."

"Well, alter your mind then! and you may be sure that he will do the same."

"That is just where the impossibility lies; for I am less disposed than ever to change my mind."

"In respect to your husband only, I hope?"

"I have a scruple, Henriette."

"A scruple about what?"

"A religious one. Do you make any difference between Huguenots and Catholics?"

"In political matters?"

"Yes."

"Of course I do."

"But in love?"

"My dear friend, we women are such pagans that, as regards sects, we embrace them all; and as regards gods, we acknowledge several."

"Or rather, a single one, do you not?"

"Yes," said the Duchess, with a glance sparkling with pure paganism; "yes, the one called Eros, Cupido, Amor; yes, the god with the quiver, with wings and bandaged eyes . . . 'Sdeath! 'tis the god for me!"

"You have a way of praying that is a trifle exclusive, my dear."

"We must do right, come what may . . . Ah! Marguerite, how the best ideas, like the noblest actions, get disguised in passing through the mouths of the vulgar!"

"The vulgar! . . . But it was my brother Charles, I fancy, who congratulated you?"

"Your brother Charles, Marguerite, is a great sportsman who blows the hunting horn all day, which makes him very thin . . . I decline him and all his blandishments. Besides, I answered your brother Charles . . . Didn't you hear my answer?"

"No, you spoke so low."

"So much the better, I shall have all the more to tell you. Come, Marguerite, let me hear the end of your confidences."

"It is that . . . that . . ."

"Well?"

"That, if you really threw the stone," said the Queen laughing, "of which my brother spoke, I had better refrain from telling you."

"Good! you have chosen a Huguenot," cried Henriette. "Well! make your mind easy! To re-assure your conscience, I promise to choose one also on the first opportunity."

"Ah! then you have taken a Catholic this time, it seems."

"'Sdeath!" replied the Duchess.

"All right, I understand."

"And who is our Huguenot?"

"I have not chosen him; this young man is nothing to me, and probably never will be."

"But, anyhow, who is he? that does not prevent your telling me, you know how inquisitive I am."

"A poor young fellow as handsome as the Nisus of Benvenuto Cellini . . . who came to take refuge in my room."

"Oh! . . . and I suppose you didn't invite him to do so?"

"Poor lad! don't laugh like that, Henriette, for he is hovering between life and death at this moment."

"Is he ill, then?"

"He is severely wounded."

"But that is very tiresome; a wounded Huguenot! at this time especially. And what are you doing with this wounded Huguenot, who is nothing to you and never will be anything?"

"He is in my closet; I am hiding him, and I want to save him."

"He is young, handsome, and wounded. You are hiding him in your closet; you want to save him; this Huguenot will be very ungrateful, if he doesn't become too grateful."

"He is already, I fear . . . more so than I could wish."

"And he interests you . . . this poor young man?"

"From humanity . . . merely."

"Ah! humanity, my poor Queen! that is always the virtue which is the undoing of us women."

"Yes, and you understand that as at any moment the King, the Duc d'Alençon, my mother, my husband even . . . may enter my room . . ."

"You want to ask me to keep your little Huguenot, isn't that it, as long as he is ill, on condition that I give him back to you when he recovers?"

"You are laughing at me," said Marguerite. "No, I swear that I am not looking forward so far. Only, if you could find some means of concealing the poor fellow, if you could preserve the life which I have saved—well! I should be really grateful to you. You are free at the Hôtel de Guise; you have neither brother-in-law nor husband to watch you or oppose you, and, what is more, dear

Henriette, you have a large closet like mine behind your room, where nobody, luckily for you, has the right to enter. Well! lend me this closet for my Huguenot, and when he is well, you shall open his cage and he will fly away."

"There is only one difficulty, dear Queen, and that is that the cage is already occupied."

"What! then you have also saved someone?"

"That is just what I answered your brother."

"Ah! I understand; that is why you spoke so low that I didn't hear you."

"Listen, Marguerite, to my story, which is most interesting and no less romantic than your own. After leaving you six of my guards, I had returned with the remaining six to the Hôtel de Guise, and was watching the sacking and burning of a house, which is only separated from my brother's palace by the Rue des Quatre-Fils, when suddenly I heard a sound of women screaming and men swearing. I stepped on to the balcony, and the first thing which I see is a sword, the fire from which seems of itself to light up the whole scene. I admire this furious blade, being a lover of heroic deeds; then I naturally try to distinguish the arm that wields it, and the body to which this arm belongs. At last, amid the blows and cries, I perceive the figure of a man, and I see . . . a hero, a Telamonian Ajax, I hear a voice, the voice of a Stentor. I am aroused to enthusiasm. I remain palpitating with excitement, starting at each thrust that threatens him, at each pass that he makes; it was such a quarter of an hour, you see, my Queen, as I had never experienced, such an exciting quarter of an hour as I could not have believed possible. So there I stood, silent, in breathless suspense, when suddenly my hero disappeared."

"How was that?"

"Beneath a stone hurled at him by an old woman, whereupon, like Cyrus, I recovered my voice, and cried: 'Help! help!' Our guards rushed out and raised him up, and eventually carried him to the room which you are asking me to give to your *protégé*."

"Ah! dear Henriette, I understand this story the better, since it is almost the same as my own."

"With this difference, my Queen, that

in order to serve my King and my religion, I shall not need to send M. Hannibal de Coconnas away.

"His name is Hannibal de Coconnas?" replied Marguerite, with a burst of laughter.

"A dreadful name, isn't it?" said Henriette. "Well! the man who bears it is worthy of it. 'Sdeath! what a champion! And what torrents of blood he set flowing! Put on your mask, my Queen, here we are at the palace."

"Why must I put on my mask?"

"Because I want to show you my hero."

"Is he handsome?"

"He seemed to me glorious while he was fighting. It is true that was at night by the light of the flames. I confess that this morning, by daylight, he didn't strike me quite so much. However, I think you will be pleased with him."

"So my *protégé* is refused at the Hôtel de Guise; I am sorry, because it is the very last place to which they would come to search for a Huguenot."

"Refused! not a bit of it; I will have him brought here this evening; the one shall lie in the corner to the right, the other in the corner to the left."

"But they will recognise one another as Catholic and Protestant, and eat each other up."

"Oh! there is no danger. M. de Coconnas has received a blow in the face, which prevents him seeing clearly; your Huguenot has received a wound in the breast, which almost prevents him from stirring . . . and then, besides, you will caution him to be silent with respect to religion, and everything will go off capitally."

"Very well; be it so."

"Agreed, let us go in."

"Thank you," said Marguerite, pressing her friend's hand.

"Here, Madame, you become 'her Majesty' again; allow me, then, to do you the honours of the Hôtel de Guise as befits the Queen of Navarre."

And the Duchess, descending from the litter, almost knelt in order to help Marguerite to descend in her turn; then, pointing with her finger to the door of the palace, which was guarded by two sentries, arquebus in hand, she followed at some distance behind the Queen, who walked majestically in front, maintaining

her attitude of respect so long as they were under observation. On reaching her chamber the Duchess shut the door, and summoning her bedchamber woman, a brisk Italian girl from Sicily:

"Mica," she said to her, in Italian, "how is M. le Comte now?"

"He gets better and better," she replied.

"And what is he doing?"

"At this moment, Madame, I believe he is taking some refreshment."

"Good," said Marguerite; "it is a good sign when the appetite returns."

"Ah! true: I forgot that you are a pupil of Ambroise Paré. Go, Mica."

"You are sending her away?"

"So that she may keep watch for us."

Mica went out.

"Now," said the Duchess, "will you go in to him, or shall I bring him here?"

"Neither; I want to see him without being seen."

"What does it matter, since you have your mask?"

"He may recognise me by my hair, my hands, some jewel."

"Oh! how prudent my fair Queen has grown since her marriage!"

Marguerite smiled.

"Well! I see only one way," continued the Duchess.

"What is that?"

"To look through the key-hole."

"Very well; take me there."

The Duchess took Marguerite by the hand, led her to a door over which fell a curtain, knelt on one knee and put her eye to the opening left by the absent key.

"Yes," she said; "he is at table, and has his face turned towards us. Come."

Marguerite took her friend's place, and in her turn put her eye to the key-hole. Coconnas, as the Duchess had said, was seated at a table well supplied with food, to which his wounds did not prevent him from doing full justice.

"Good heavens!" cried Marguerite, starting back.

"What is it?" asked the Duchess, in astonishment.

"Impossible! No! Yes! Oh! on my soul, it is he himself!"

"Who himself?"

"Hush!" said Marguerite, getting up and seizing the Duchess's hand, "it is the man who tried to kill my Huguenot, who pursued him into my bedroom, who struck him when he was in my arms."

Oh! Henriette, how lucky he did not see me!"

"Well, then, since you saw him at work, didn't you think him handsome?"

"I don't know," said Marguerite; "for I was looking at the man whom he was pursuing."

"And what is the name of the man whom he was pursuing?"

"You will not mention it before him?"

"No, I promise you."

"Lerac de La Mole."

"And what do you think of him now?"

"Of M. de La Mole?"

"No, of M. de Coconnas."

"Upon my word," said Marguerite, "I confess I think. . . ."

She paused.

"Come, come," said the Duchess, "I see you are angry with him for having wounded your Huguenot."

"But it seems to me," said Marguerite, laughing, "that my Huguenot owes him nothing, and that the gash with which he has underlined his eye . . ."

"They are quits, then, and we can patch up their quarrels. Send me your wounded man."

"No, not yet; later on."

"When?"

"When you have lent your man another room."

"Which room?"

Marguerite looked at her friend, who, after a moment's silence, looked at her also and began to laugh.

"Well, be it so!" said the Duchess. "And so, alliance between us, closer than ever."

"Sincere friendship always," replied the Queen.

"And the password, the sign of recognition, if we should want one another?"

"The triple name of your triple divinity—Eros-Cupido-Amor."

And the two women separated, after embracing each other for the second time and shaking hands for the twentieth time.

CHAPTER XIII

KEYS MAY SOMETIMES OPEN DOORS FOR WHICH THEY WERE NEVER INTENDED

THE Queen of Navarre, on her return to the Louvre, found Gillonne in a state of great excitement. During the Queen's absence Madame de Sauve had come, bringing a key which had been handed to her by the Queen-Mother. This key belonged to the room in which Henri was confined. It was clear that, for some reason or other, the Queen-Mother wished the Prince de Béarn to spend the night with Madame de Sauve.

Marguerite took the key and turned it over and over in her hands. She recalled every word spoken by Madame de Sauve, weighed it letter by letter in her mind, and thought she understood Catherine's design.

Taking pen and ink, she wrote on a piece of paper :

"Instead of going to-night to Madame de Sauve, come to the Queen of Navarre.

"MARGUERITE."

Then she rolled up the paper, placed it in the hollow of the key, and ordered Gillonne to slip the key under the prisoner's door as soon as it was dark.

This first care accomplished, Marguerite thought of the wounded man; she closed all the doors, entered the closet, and to her great astonishment found La Mole dressed again in his clothes, which were still all torn and blood-stained.

On seeing her he tried to rise; but staggered and was unable to stand, and fell back upon the sofa which had been converted into a bed.

"Why, sir, what has happened?" asked Marguerite, "and why are you so disobedient to your doctor's orders? I ordered you rest, and instead of obeying me you are doing just the opposite!"

"Oh! Madame!" said Gillonne, "it is not my fault: I implored Monsieur le Comte not to be so foolish, but he declared that nothing would keep him any longer at the Louvre."

"You want to leave the Louvre!" said Marguerite, looking in astonishment at the young man, who lowered his eyes; "why, it is impossible. You cannot walk; you are pale and without strength;

I can see your knees shake. The wound in your shoulder bled again this morning."

"Madame," answered the young man, "earnestly as I thank your Majesty for having given me shelter yesterday evening, I ask you as earnestly to be good enough to let me go away to-day."

"But," said Marguerite in amazement, "I know not how to describe such a mad determination; it is worse than ingratitude."

"Oh! Madame!" cried La Mole, clasping his hands, "believe me that, far from being ungrateful, I have a feeling of gratitude in my heart that will last all my life."

"It will not last long then!" said Marguerite, stirred by his tone, which left no doubt of the sincerity of his words; "for, either your wounds will reopen and you will die from loss of blood, or you will be recognised as a Huguenot and be killed before you have gone a hundred yards down the street."

"I must leave the Louvre nevertheless," murmured La Mole.

"You must!" said Marguerite, looking at him with a clear and penetrating glance; then, turning slightly pale: "Oh! yes, I understand, I beg your pardon, Monsieur; doubtless there is some person outside the Louvre to whom your absence causes cruel uneasiness. Quite right and natural, Monsieur de la Mole, and I understand perfectly. Why did you not say so at once, or rather, why did I not think of it myself? It is a duty, when one shows hospitality, to protect the affections of your guest as well as to dress his wounds, and to look after his heart as well as his body."

"Alas! Madame," answered La Mole, "you are strangely in error. I am nearly alone in the world and quite alone in Paris, where nobody knows me. My assassin is the first man that I spoke to in this city, and your Majesty is the first woman who has spoken to me."

"In that case," said Marguerite in surprise, "why do you want to go away?"

"Because," said La Mole, "last night your Majesty had no rest, and to-night . . ."

Marguerite blushed.

"Gillonne," said she, "it is getting late, I think it is time you took the key."

Gillonne smiled and withdrew.

"But," continued Marguerite, "if you are alone in Paris and friendless, what will you do?"

"Madame, I shall find friends; for, as I was being pursued, I thought of my mother, who was a Catholic; I seemed to see her glide before me on my way to the Louvre, with a cross in her hand, and I vowed that, should God preserve my life, I would embrace my mother's religion. God has done more than preserve my life, Madame; He has sent me one of His angels to make me love her."

"But you cannot walk; you will faint before you have gone a hundred yards."

"Madame, I made trial of myself yesterday in the next room; I walk slowly and with difficulty, it is true; but let me only reach the Place du Louvre; once there, I will wait on events."

Marguerite leaned her head on her hand and pondered deeply.

"And the King of Navarre," she said with intention; "you no longer speak of him to me. Have you, in changing your religion, lost the desire to enter his service?"

"Madame," replied La Mole, turning pale, "you have just touched upon the true reason for my departure. . . . I know that the King of Navarre is in imminent danger, and that your majesty's whole influence as a Daughter of France will scarcely avail to save his head."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Marguerite, "and of what dangers are you speaking?"

"Madame," replied La Mole, with some hesitation, "everything can be heard from that closet."

"True," murmured Marguerite to herself, "M. de Guise had already told me so."

Then she added aloud:—

"Well, what have you heard?"

"Why, in the first place, the conversation which your Majesty had with your brother this morning."

"With François?" cried Marguerite blushing.

"With the Duc d'Alençon, yes, Madame; and then afterwards, the conversation of Mademoiselle Gillonne with Madame de Sauve."

"And it is these two conversations . . .?"

"Yes, Madame. You have been married for barely a week, and you love

your husband. He will come in his turn, as the Duc d'Alençon and Madame de Sauve have come. He will confide his secrets to you. Well! I ought not to hear these secrets; I might be indiscreet . . . and I can't . . . I ought not . . . above all, I *will* not be that!"

The tone in which La Mole uttered these last words, the agitation in his voice and the confusion on his countenance, conveyed the truth to Marguerite with a sudden flash.

"Ah!" said she, "you heard from that closet all that has been said in this room up till now?"

"Yes, Madame."

The words were hardly audible.

"And you want to go away this evening, so that you may hear no more?"

"This very instant, Madame, if it please your Majesty to give me permission."

"Poor fellow!" said Marguerite, in an unmistakeable tone of pity.

Astonished at such a gentle answer when he was expecting a sharp reply, La Mole raised his head timidly; his look met Marguerite's, and remained rivetted by some magnetic power on the clear and penetrating gaze of the Queen.

"You think yourself incapable of keeping a secret then, M. de la Mole?" said Marguerite softly.

She was reclining against the back of her chair, half concealed by the shadow of a thick curtain, and thus enjoyed the happiness of reading the young man's mind completely, while her own feelings remained unfathomable.

"Madame," said De la Mole, "I have an unfortunate disposition; I distrust myself, and to see the happiness of another gives me pain."

"Whose happiness?" said Marguerite, with a smile. "Ah! yes, the happiness of the King of Navarre! Poor Henri!"

"You see how happy he is, Madame!" cried La Mole quickly.

"Happy? . . ."

"Yes, since your Majesty pities him."

Marguerite crumpled the silk of her alms-bag, unravelling the golden fringe.

"Then you refuse to see the King of Navarre?" she said, "your mind is made up on that point?"

"I shrink from being importunate to his Majesty at this moment."

"But my brother, the Duc d'Alençon?"

"Oh, Madame!" cried La Mole, "the Duc d'Alençon! No, no; even less would I solicit the Duc d'Alençon than the King of Navarre."

"Because . . ." asked Marguerite, with an emotion betokened by the trembling of her voice.

"Because, though I am already too half-hearted a Huguenot to be a devoted servant to his Majesty the King of Navarre, I am not yet a good enough Catholic to be friendly with M. d'Alençon and M. de Guise."

It was now Marguerite's turn to droop her eyes and to feel her inmost heart vibrate; she could not have said whether La Mole's words pleased her or gave her pain.

At this moment Gillonne returned. Marguerite questioned her with a glance; Gillonne's answer, also conveyed by a glance, was in the affirmative. She had succeeded in conveying the key to the King of Navarre.

Marguerite turned her eyes once more upon La Mole, who remained in an attitude of indecision, his head drooping on his breast, and pale as a man who is suffering at once in mind and body.

"Monsieur de la Mole is proud," she said, "and I hesitate to make a proposal to him which he will doubtless reject."

La Mole rose, took a step towards Marguerite, and would have bowed before her in token that he was at her orders; but a deep, sharp, burning pain drew tears from his eyes, and feeling that he was going to fall, he caught hold of a curtain to support himself.

"There, you see," cried Marguerite, running to him and holding him in her arms, "you see, sir, that you still need my help."

La Mole's lips barely moved.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, "I need you as the air I breathe, as the light I see."

At this moment a knock, thrice repeated, was heard at Marguerite's door.

"Do you hear, Madame?" said Gillonne in alarm.

"Already!" murmured Marguerite.

"Must I open the door?"

"Wait; it is the King of Navarre perhaps."

"Oh! Madame!" cried La Mole, recovering his strength at these words, which the Queen had uttered in so low a tone that she hoped that Gillonne only had

heard them, "Madame! on my knees I entreat you, let me go, yes, alive or dead. Have pity on me! You do not answer. Well! I will speak! and when I have spoken, then you will drive me away, I hope."

"Be silent, unfortunate man!" said Marguerite, who felt an unspeakable charm in listening to his reproaches; "be silent, will you!"

"Madame," replied La Mole, who doubtless did not consider Marguerite's tone as stern as he had expected, "I repeat that everything can be heard from this closet. Do not condemn me to die by a worse death than the most cruel executioners could devise."

"Hush! hush!" said Marguerite.

"Oh! Madame, you are pitiless, you will not listen. But understand that I love you . . ."

"Hush, I tell you!" interrupted Marguerite, laying her warm, scented hand over the mouth of the young man, who seized it in his hands and pressed it to his lips.

"But . . ." murmured La Mole.

"Be silent, child! Who is this rebel who will not obey his Queen?"

Then, stepping quickly from the closet, she closed the door, and supporting herself against the wall, as with one hand she tried to still the violent beating of her heart:

"Open, Gillonne," she said.

Gillonne left the room, and a moment later the curtain was lifted by the King of Navarre.

"You sent for me, Madame?" said he to Marguerite.

"Yes, sire, your Majesty received my letter?"

"Not without some surprise, I confess," said Henri, looking round him with a suspicion which soon vanished.

"And not without some uneasiness, I fancy, Monsieur," added Marguerite.

"I admit it, Madame. Yet, though surrounded by relentless enemies, and by friends who are even more dangerous than my enemies, I remembered that on a certain evening I had seen your eyes beam with a sentiment of generosity—it was the day of our wedding—and that on another day I had seen in those eyes the flash of courage, and that was yesterday, the day fixed for my death."

"Well, sir?" said Marguerite, smiling,

while Henri seemed to be trying to read the depths of her heart.

"Well! Madame, as I thought of all this, I said to myself directly I read your note summoning me to come, 'The King of Navarre, a defenceless prisoner and friendless, has but one means of dying a death that shall make a stir and be recorded in the annals of history, and that is to be betrayed to death by his wife,' and so I came."

"Sire," replied Marguerite, "you will alter your tone when you learn that all that is taking place at this moment is the work of one who loves you . . . and whom you love."

Henri drew back at these words, and his piercing grey eyes from beneath their dark lashes eagerly questioned the Queen.

"Oh! do not be alarmed, sire," said the Queen with a smile, "I do not pretend for a moment that this person is myself."

"But yet, Madame," said Henri, "it is you who sent me the key, and this is your writing."

"That it is my writing and that it comes from me, I do not deny. As to the key, that is a different matter. Enough for you that it has passed through no less than four women's hands before reaching you."

"Four!" cried Henri with amazement.

"Yes, no less than four," said Marguerite: "the Queen-Mother, Madame de Sauve, Gillonne, and myself."

Henri began to ponder this puzzle.

"Let us talk sensibly now, sire, and above all, frankly," said Marguerite. "Is it true that, as was publicly reported yesterday, your Majesty had consented to abjure?"

"Report is wrong, Madame, I have not yet consented."

"But you have made up your mind, however."

"That is to say, I am deliberating. What would you have? When one is twenty and in sight of a throne, why, i' faith! there are things which are well worth a Mass."

"Including life among those things, is it not so?"

Henri could not repress a slight smile.

"You are not telling me everything, sire," said Marguerite.

"I reserve something from my allies, Madame; for, you know, we are as yet but allies. If you were both my ally . . . and . . ."

"And your wife, you mean, sire?"

"Yes . . . and my wife . . ."

"Then?"

"Then perhaps it would be different, and perhaps I should incline to remain King of the Huguenots, as they say . . . As things are, I must be contented that I am spared my life."

Marguerite regarded Henri with so strange a look that it would have aroused suspicions in a mind much less acute than that of the King of Navarre.

"And are you sure of arriving at that result at least?" she said.

"Pretty well," said Henri; "in this world, as you know, Madame, one is never sure of anything."

"It is true," replied Marguerite, "that your Majesty announces so much moderation and professes so much disinterestedness, that, after renouncing your crown and your religion, you will probably renounce—so it is hoped, at least—your union with a Daughter of France."

These words carried with them such a deep significance that Henri shuddered involuntarily. But speedily mastering his emotion, he continued:

"Deign to recollect, Madame, that at this moment I am not my own master; I shall act, therefore, as the King of France orders me. As for myself, if I were consulted in the slightest degree upon this question, in which is involved no less than my throne, my honour, and my life, rather than base my future upon any rights which our forced marriage may give me, I should prefer to bury myself as a hunter in some castle, or as a penitent in some cloister."

This attitude of resignation to circumstances and this renunciation of worldly ambitions, alarmed Marguerite. She thought that possibly the rupture of their marriage had been agreed upon between Charles IX., Catherine, and the King of Navarre. As for herself, would they hesitate about placing her in the position of dupe or victim, merely because she was the sister of the one and the daughter of the other? Experience had taught her that these were no grounds on which she could base her security. Ambition, therefore, gnawed at the heart of the young Queen, who was too superior to vulgar weaknesses to allow herself to be dragged into a loss of self-respect; in the case of all women, even common-place ones, when they are in love, their love

inflicts none of this misery upon them, for true love is ambition as well.

"Your Majesty," said Marguerite, with a kind of bantering scorn, "has not much confidence, methinks, in the star that shines above every monarch's brow?"

"Ah!" said Henri, "it is because I have searched for mine at this moment all in vain, concealed as it is by the storm which now roars over my head."

"What if a woman's breath were to dispel this storm and make the star shine as brightly as before?"

"It would be very difficult," said Henri.

"Do you deny the existence of this woman, sire?"

"No, I only deny her power."

"Her willingness, you mean?"

"I said her power, and I repeat the word. A woman is only really powerful when she combines within her both love and interest in equal degree; should one only of these two sentiments fill her thoughts, then like Achilles she is vulnerable. Well, in the case of this woman, unless I mistake, I cannot reckon on her love."

Marguerite was silent.

"Listen," continued Henri, "at the last stroke of the bell of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois you ought to have thought of regaining your liberty, which had been pawned for the purpose of destroying those of my party, while I ought to have thought of saving my life. That was the thing most urgent. . . . Thereby we lose Navarre, I know well, but Navarre is a trifle in comparison of the freedom granted you of being able to speak aloud in your own room, a thing which you did not venture to do when you had someone in that closet listening to you."

Although at the height of her pre-occupation, Marguerite could not forbear a smile. As for the King of Navarre, he had already risen in order to return to his apartments, for it was already past eleven, and the Louvre was asleep, or at any rate, seemed to be asleep.

Henri took three steps towards the door; then suddenly stopped as though he had only at that moment remembered the reason that had brought him to the Queen.

"By the bye, Madame," said he, "have you not some communication to make to me; or did you only wish to give me the opportunity of thanking you for the reprieve afforded me yesterday by your

courageous entry into the King's armoury? In truth, Madame, you came just in time, I cannot deny it, and descended on the scene like some goddess of old, just in the nick of time to save my life."

"Unhappy man!" cried Marguerite in a hollow voice, seizing her husband by the arm. "Don't you see, then, that, on the contrary, nothing is saved, neither your freedom, your crown, nor your life! Poor blind fool! You saw in my letter nothing but an appointment? You thought that Marguerite, incensed by your coldness, desired a reparation?"

"But, Madame," cried Henri in astonishment, "I confess . . ."

Marguerite shrugged her shoulders with an expression impossible to describe.

At the same instant a strange sound, like a sharp, eager scratching, was heard at the small concealed door.

Marguerite dragged the King in the direction of the door.

"Listen," she said.

"The Queen-Mother is coming out," said a voice rendered tremulous by terror, which Henri immediately recognised as that of Madame de Sauve.

"And where is she going?" asked Marguerite.

"She is coming to your Majesty."

The rustling of a silken robe growing fainter in the distance, showed that Madame de Sauve had run away.

"Oh! oh!" cried Henri.

"I was certain of it," said Marguerite.

"And I feared as much," said Henri, "and here is the proof."

Upon which, with a rapid movement, he opened his black velvet doublet, and disclosed to Marguerite a fine tunic of steel, covering his breast, and a long Milanese dagger, which gleamed in his hand like a snake in the sun.

"We have something else to think of here besides steel and cuirass!" cried Marguerite. "Come, sire, hide that dagger; it is the Queen-Mother, true; but the Queen-Mother alone and unattended."

"Still . . ."

"Silence! she is here, I hear her."

And stooping to Henri's ear, she whispered some words which the King listened to with attention mingled with astonishment.

Henri at once concealed himself behind the curtains of the bed.

Marguerite, on her side, sprang with the agility of a panther towards the closet where La Mole was waiting, and grasping his hand in the darkness :

"Silence !" said she to him, coming so close that he felt her warm, perfumed breath like a moist vapour on his face, "Silence !"

Then, returning to her room and shutting the door, she unfastened her head-gear, cut all the strings of her dress with her dagger, and threw herself into bed.

She was just in time, the key was turning in the lock.

Catherine had pass-keys for all the doors in the Louvre.

"Who is there ?" cried Marguerite, while Catherine stationed at the door a guard of four gentlemen who accompanied her.

And, as though alarmed at this abrupt invasion of her chamber, Marguerite, issuing from behind the curtains in a white dressing-gown, sprang from the bed, and on recognising Catherine came to kiss her hand with such well-feigned surprise that even the Florentine was taken in by it.

CHAPTER XIV

SECOND NIGHT AFTER THE WEDDING

THE Queen-Mother surveyed the scene with marvellous rapidity. Velvet slippers at the foot of the bed, Marguerite's garments scattered on the chairs, the rubbing of her eyes as though she had been fast asleep—all these signs convinced Catherine that she had aroused her daughter from sleep.

Thereupon she smiled as a woman who has been successful in her schemes, and drawing up a chair :

"Let us sit down, Marguerite," she said, "and have a chat."

"I am listening to you, Madame."

"It is time, my daughter," said Catherine, closing her eyes in that slow way peculiar to people who are reflecting or dissimulating deeply, "it is time that you should understand how greatly your brother and I desire to make you happy."

The exordium was an alarming one to anybody who knew Catherine well.

"What is she going to tell me ?" thought Marguerite.

"In arranging this marriage," continued the Florentine, "we have certainly accomplished one of those acts of policy which weighty considerations enjoin on those who govern. But it must be confessed, my poor child, we did not dream that the King of Navarre's aversion to you, young, beautiful, and attractive as you are, would be persisted in up to this point."

Marguerite rose, and, drawing together the folds of her nightdress, made her mother a ceremonious curtsey.

"It is only this evening that I have learnt," said Catherine,—"otherwise I should have come to see you sooner—that your husband is far from showing you those attentions which are due, not only to a pretty woman, but also to a Daughter of France."

Marguerite sighed, and Catherine, encouraged by this mute token of agreement, continued :

"That the King of Navarre should, in point of fact, carry on an open intimacy with one of my maids of honour, whose conduct towards him amounts to a scandal, that this infatuation should lead him to despise the wife whom we have been pleased to assign to him, is a misfortune which cannot be remedied by us poor creatures who hold this exalted rank, but which the humblest gentleman in our Kingdom would avenge by challenging his son-in-law, either himself, or through one of his sons."

Marguerite drooped her head.

"I have seen for some time, my daughter," continued Catherine, "by your red eyes and your bitter outbursts against Madame de Sauve, that the wound in your heart cannot always, spite of your efforts, bleed inwardly."

Marguerite started ; a slight movement had shaken the curtains, but happily Catherine did not notice it.

"This wound, my child," she said, increasing her affectionate sweetness, "it is for the hand of a mother to heal. Those who arranged your marriage, thinking to promote your happiness, and who, in their solicitude on your account, remark that Henri de Navarre is absent from your apartment every night ; those who cannot tolerate that a puppet-King such

as he is should offer a continual insult to a woman of your beauty, rank, and worth by his contempt of your person and his indifference as to posterity; those who see, in short, that at the first breath of wind which he deems favourable, this foolish and insolent creature will turn against our family and drive you from his house—have not they the right to provide for your future, by annulling your connection with him, in a manner more worthy both of yourself and your position?"

"And yet, Madame," replied Marguerite, "in spite of these observations, prompted by your maternal affection, and which fill me with joy and pride, I am bold enough to represent to your Majesty that the King of Navarre is my husband."

Catherine made an angry movement, and coming closer to Marguerite:

"He your husband!" she said. "Is the blessing of the Church, then, sufficient to make you husband and wife, and does the consecration of marriage consist solely in the words of the priest. Your husband, indeed! Why, my girl, if you were Madame de Sauve you might give me that answer. But, contrary to what we expected of him, since the day that you gave Henri de Navarre the honour of calling you his wife, he has surrendered your marriage rights to another, and at this moment," said Catherine, raising her voice, "if you come with me—this key opens the door of Madame de Sauve's apartment—you shall see for yourself."

"Oh! Madame, please do not speak so loud," said Marguerite, "for not only are you mistaken, but you will also . . ."

"Well?"

"Well! you will awake my husband."

At these words Marguerite rose with voluptuous grace, and letting her night-dress float half open, the short sleeves of which left exposed her beautifully rounded arm and truly royal hand, she held a taper of pink wax to the bed, and raising the curtain, smilingly pointed out to her mother the proud profile, the dark hair, and the half-opened mouth of the King of Navarre, who seemed to be in a calm and deep sleep upon the disordered bed.

Pale, with haggard eyes, crouching backwards as though a gulf had yawned beneath her feet, Catherine uttered a sound that was more like the hoarse bellow of a wild beast than a woman's cry.

"You see, Madame," said Marguerite, "that you were wrongly informed."

Catherine glanced at Marguerite, then at Henri. Her active brain connected the sight of that pale, moist brow, and those eyes surrounded by a faint ring of bistre, with Marguerite's smile, and she bit her thin lips in silent rage.

Marguerite allowed her mother a moment in which to contemplate this picture, which produced on her the effect of the Medusa's head. Then she dropped the curtain, and, walking on tiptoe, came back to Catherine, and, resuming her seat, observed:

"You were saying, Madame?"

The Florentine tried for some moments to fathom the girl's simplicity; then, as though her keen glance had been dulled by Marguerite's calm demeanour:

"Nothing," she said.

And she quitted the apartment with hasty steps.

As soon as the sound of her feet had died away in the distance of the corridor, the curtain of the bed was opened again, and Henri, with sparkling eyes, oppressed breathing, and trembling hands, came and knelt before Marguerite. He was dressed only in his hose and coat of mail, and Marguerite, seeing him in this ridiculous costume, while grasping his hand heartily, could not help bursting out into laughter.

"Ah! Marguerite," he cried, "how shall I ever repay my debt to you?"

And he covered her hand with kisses, which mounted up insensibly from her hand to her arm.

"Sire," she said, drawing back quite gently, "do you forget that at this moment an unhappy woman, to whom you owe your life, is pining at your absence? Madame de Sauve," she added, in a low tone, "has sacrificed her jealousy by sending you to me, and perhaps, after sacrificing her jealousy, she will sacrifice her life for you, for you know—none better—that my mother's wrath is terrible."

Henri shuddered, and rising from his knees, made as though he would go out.

"Oh! but after all," said Marguerite, with admirable coquetry, "I am comforted on reflection. The key was given you without indication of how it was to be used, and you will be deemed to have shown me the preference this evening."

"And I do show it you, Marguerite; consent only to forget . . ."

"Speak lower, sire, speak lower," replied the Queen, mimicking the words she had used to her mother ten minutes earlier; "you can be heard from the closet, and as I am not yet quite at liberty, I will ask you not to speak so loud."

"Oh!" said Henri, half laughing, half annoyed, "it is true; I forgot that it was probably not I who was destined to play the last scene of this interesting comedy. This closet . . ."

"Let us go in, sire," said Marguerite, "for I wish to have the honour of presenting to your Majesty a brave gentleman who was wounded during the massacre, as he was coming to the Louvre to warn your Majesty of the danger you were in."

The Queen, followed by Henri, went towards the door.

The door opened, and great was the astonishment of Henri on seeing a man in this closet destined to afford so many surprises.

But greater still was the astonishment of La Mole on finding himself unexpectedly face to face with the King of Navarre. Henri looked at Marguerite with a glance of irony, which she met with perfect composure.

"Sire," said Marguerite, "I have reason to fear that this gentleman, who is devoted to your Majesty's service, may yet be killed even here in my apartment, and therefore I commit him to your protection."

"Sire," said the young man, "I am the Comte Lerac de La Mole, whom your Majesty was expecting, and who was recommended to you by the unfortunate M. de T  ligny, who was killed fighting by my side."

"Ah!" said Henri, "the Queen, in fact, handed me his letter; but had you not also a letter from the Governor of Languedoc?"

"Yes, sire, with instructions to give it to your Majesty directly I arrived."

"Why did you not do so?"

"Sire, I came to the Louvre yesterday evening, but your Majesty was so busy that you were unable to receive me."

"True," said the King, "but I think you might have sent the letter in to me."

"I had orders from M. d'Auriac to give it to no one but your Majesty, since it contained, as he assured me, news of

such importance that he dared not confide it to an ordinary messenger."

"In point of fact," said the King, taking the letter and reading it, "he advised me to leave the Court and retire to B  arn. M. d'Auriac, though a Catholic, was a true friend of mine, and had probably, as governor of the province, got wind of what was going on. Zounds, sir! why not have handed me this letter three days ago, instead of giving it to me to-day?"

"Because, as I have had the honour to inform your Majesty, in spite of all my diligence, I was unable to arrive until yesterday."

"It is most annoying," muttered the King, "for we might by now have been in safety, either at La Rochelle, or on some good plain with two or three thousand horse round us."

"Sire," said Marguerite *sotto voce*, "what is done is done, and instead of wasting time in recriminations as regards the past, the question is how to derive the greatest advantage for the future."

"Were you in my place," said Henri, with his questioning glance, "should you still entertain hope, Madame?"

"Yes, certainly, I should regard the game as consisting of three points, of which I had lost but the first deal."

"Ah! Madame," said Henri, in a low tone, "if I could feel sure that you were my partner in the game . . ."

"Had I wanted to go over to your opponents," answered Marguerite, "I think I should not have waited so long."

"True," said Henri; "I am ungrateful, and, as you say, all may yet be repaired even to-day."

"Alas! sire," replied La Mole, "I wish your Majesty all success, but to-day we have the Admiral no longer with us."

Henri smiled that cunning smile of which the meaning was not understood at the Court until the day that he became King of France.

"But, Madame," he replied, with a significant glance at La Mole, "this gentleman cannot remain here without putting you to great inconvenience, and being exposed to annoying surprises. What shall you do with him?"

"Why, sire," said Marguerite, "cannot we get him out of the Louvre, for I agree entirely with what you say."

"It would be difficult."

"Cannot M. de La Mole find a place in your Majesty's household?"

"Alas! Madame, you treat me as though I were still King of the Huguenots and ruler of a people. You know quite well that I am half a Catholic, and have now no following at all."

Any other but Marguerite would have hastened to reply: "La Mole is a Catholic likewise!" But Marguerite wished that Henri should ask her for what she desired to obtain. As for La Mole, seeing the caution observed by his protectress, and not knowing yet where to plant his foot on the slippery ground of a Court so dangerous as that of France, he remained silent likewise.

"But," resumed Henri, reading the letter once more, "why does the Governor of Provence tell me that your mother was a Catholic, and that this accounts for his friendship towards you?"

"And what was it you were saying to me, Monsieur le Comte," said Marguerite, "about a vow which you had made in regard to a change of religion? My ideas are confused on that point; so help me, Monsieur de La Mole. Wasn't there a question of your taking some such step as the King appears to desire?"

"Alas! yes, but your Majesty received my explanations on this point so coldly that I did not venture. . . ."

"Because, sir, the matter did not affect me. Make your explanations to the King."

"Well! what was this vow?"

"Sire," said La Mole, "when I was being pursued by the assassins, weaponless, almost dying from my two wounds, I seemed to see my mother with a cross in her hand guiding me towards the Louvre. Then I vowed, were my life spared, to adopt the creed of my mother, who had been allowed by God to leave her grave to act as my guide during that terrible night. God led me hither, sire. I see myself here beneath the double protection of a Daughter of France and of the King of Navarre. My life has been miraculously preserved; it only remains for me to fulfil my vow. I am ready to become a Catholic."

Henri frowned: sceptical as he was, he understood an abjuration from motives of self-interest, but was little inclined to believe in abjuration on religious grounds.

"The King is not willing to undertake my *protégé*," thought Marguerite.

In presence of these two opposing wills, La Mole's attitude was one of

constraint and timidity. He felt, without explaining it to himself, the absurdity of his position. It was Marguerite who, with feminine delicacy, extricated him from his unpleasant situation.

"Sire," she said, "we are forgetting that the poor wounded man needs rest. I am tumbling off to sleep myself. Why, look!"

La Mole was indeed turning pale, but his paleness was caused by Marguerite's last words, which he had heard and understood.

"Well, Madame," said Henri, "nothing more easy; cannot we leave M. de La Mole to take his rest?"

The young man directed a supplicating glance towards Marguerite, and, spite of their Majesties' presence, fell back into a chair, overcome by pain and fatigue.

Marguerite understood both the love conveyed in the look and the despair denoted by the weakness.

"Sire," said she, "this young gentleman has risked his life for his King, since he ran here, after he had been wounded, to announce to you the deaths of the Admiral and Téligny, and it behoves your Majesty to do him an honour for which he will be grateful all his life."

"What is that, Madame?" said Henri: "command me; I am ready to obey."

"M. de La Mole will sleep to-night at the feet of your Majesty, who will lie on this couch. As for myself," added Marguerite, with a smile, "with my august husband's permission I shall call Gillonne and retire to rest; for I swear to you, sire, that I am not the one of us three who stands least in need of repose."

Henri was possessed of plenty of spirit—perhaps of even too much of it—both friends and foes reproached him with this later on. But he realised that she who thus banished him from the conjugal couch had acquired the right to do so by the very indifference which he had displayed towards her; besides, Marguerite had avenged herself for this indifference by saving his life. His answer, therefore, conveyed no suggestion of wounded self-esteem.

"Madame," said he, "were M. de La Mole in a condition to reach my apartment, I would offer him my own bed."

"Yes," replied Marguerite; "but your apartment at the present moment can protect neither of you, and prudence

requires that your Majesty should remain here until to-morrow."

And without waiting for the King's reply she summoned Gillonne, placed cushions for the King upon the couch, and also at the foot of the couch for La Mole, who seemed so happy and contented with this honour that you would have sworn his wounds no longer pained him.

As for Marguerite, after dropping a ceremonious curtsy to the King, she returned to her room, and, after seeing that all the doors were well bolted, lay down on her bed.

"Now," said Marguerite to herself, "M. de La Mole must have a protector at the Louvre to-morrow, and he who turned a deaf ear to-night will to-morrow be sorry for it."

Then she signed to Gillonne, who was waiting to receive her final instructions.

"Gillonne," she said, in low tones, "it is necessary that, under some pretext or other, my brother, the Duc d'Alençon, should be seized with a wish to come here to-morrow morning before eight o'clock."

Two o'clock struck at the Louvre.

La Mole talked a few moments, as discretion demanded, with the King, who gradually went off to sleep, and was presently snoring loudly, as though he had been lying on his own rough couch in his native Béarn.

La Mole possibly slept soundly, like the King; but there was no sleep for Marguerite, who tossed on her bed from side to side, disturbing by her restlessness the young man's thoughts and sleep.

"He is very young," murmured Marguerite, as she lay awake; "he is very shy, and perhaps even a little ridiculous; but he has nice eyes, a good figure, and many attractive points; but suppose . . . suppose he should turn out to be a coward, after all! He was running away when he received his wound . . . and now he is abjuring . . . it is annoying, for the dream was beginning well . . . come . . . let me drop this subject and turn to the triple god of that foolish Henriette."

And towards the early morning Marguerite succeeded at length in falling asleep, murmuring to herself, *Eros-Cupido-Amor*.

CHAPTER XV

WHAT WOMAN WILLS, GOD WILLS

MARGUERITE was not wrong; the wrath excited in Catherine's breast by this comedy, in which she perceived the plot without having any power to alter its *dénoûement*, was bound to descend upon somebody. Instead of returning to her apartments, the Queen-Mother went straight up to the room of her lady of the bedchamber.

Madame de Sauve was expecting two visits; that of Henri she was hoping for, that of the Queen-Mother she was dreading. As she lay in bed, half-dressed, while Dariole kept watch in the ante-chamber, she heard a key turn in the lock, and then the approach of slow steps, which would also have been loud and heavy, had they not been deadened by the thickness of the carpet. She could not recognise in these steps the light and eager tread of Henri; she suspected that someone was preventing Dariole from coming to warn her, and, leaning on one elbow, with eyes and ears on the alert, she waited.

The curtain was raised, and with a shudder the young woman saw Catherine de' Medici appear before her.

Catherine was outwardly calm; but Madame de Sauve, accustomed to study her for the last two years, knew how much stern purpose, and perhaps cruel vengeance, lay concealed beneath that apparent calmness.

Madame de Sauve would have jumped out of bed on perceiving Catherine, but the Queen raised her finger to forbid this, and poor Charlotte remained rooted to the spot, trying to summon up all her courage in order to face the storm which was silently brewing.

"Did you convey the key to the King of Navarre?" asked Catherine, the tone of her voice indicating no change of manner; her lips, however, grew paler as she spoke the words.

"Yes, Madame . . ." in a tone which she vainly tried to make as confident as Catherine's.

"And you saw him?"

"Saw whom?"

"The King of Navarre"

"No, Madame, but I am expecting

him; indeed, when I heard the key turn in the door, I thought it was he who was coming."

At this reply, which was either one of perfect truth, or else the height of dissimulation, Catherine could not restrain a slight shudder. She clenched her plump, broad hand.

"And yet, Carlotta, you knew perfectly well," she observed, with her evil smile, "that the King of Navarre would not come to-night."

"I, Madame, I knew that!" cried Charlotte, with an admirably-feigned accent of surprise.

"Yes, you knew it."

"Not to come means that he must be dead!" replied the young woman, shuddering at the mere supposition.

What gave Charlotte the courage to brazen it out thus was the certainty she entertained of a terrible punishment in case her small act of treachery were discovered.

"You didn't write, then, to the King of Navarre, Carlotta mia?" asked Catherine, with the same silent and cruel laugh.

"No, Madame," answered Charlotte, in a tone of admirable simplicity, "your Majesty didn't tell me to, I believe."

A short silence ensued, during which Catherine gazed at Madame de Sauve much as the snake gazes at the bird which it wishes to fascinate.

"You think yourself beautiful and clever, do you not?" Catherine presently went on.

"No, Madame," answered Charlotte; "I know only that your Majesty has been exceedingly indulgent to me when there was any question of my cleverness and beauty."

"Well," said Catherine, becoming animated, "you were mistaken if you believed that, and I lied if I told you so; you are only an ugly fool compared with my daughter Margot."

"That is quite true, Madame," said Charlotte, "and I shall not attempt to deny it, to you especially."

"Accordingly," continued Catherine, "the King of Navarre much prefers my daughter to you, and that is not what you wanted, I imagine, nor is it what we had arranged."

"Alas! Madame," said Charlotte, this time bursting into sobs which were not in the least counterfeited, "if that be so I am very unhappy."

"It is so," said Catherine, transfixing Madame de Sauve with the glance of her eyes, like a double dagger-thrust.

"But what can make you think so?" asked Charlotte.

"Go down to the Queen of Navarre, fool! and you will find your lover there."

"Oh!" said Madame de Sauve.

Catherine shrugged her shoulders.

"Are you jealous, by any chance?" asked the Queen-Mother.

"I?" said Madame de Sauve, summoning up her strength, which seemed on the point of deserting her.

"Yes, you! I am curious to see what the jealousy of a Frenchwoman is like."

"But," said Madame de Sauve, "how would you expect me to have any other feeling than that of wounded self-pride? I love the King of Navarre only so far as is necessary in order for me to serve your Majesty."

Catherine looked at her for a moment with pensive eyes.

"What you tell me may possibly, on the whole, be true," she murmured.

"Your Majesty reads my heart."

"And that heart is entirely devoted to me?"

"Command me, Madame, and you shall judge."

"Well, then, Carlotta, since you sacrifice yourself in my service, you must continue, still in the same interest, to be very much smitten with the King of Navarre, and above all to be very jealous—jealous as an Italian woman would be."

"But, Madame," asked Catherine, "how does an Italian show her jealousy?"

"I will tell you," replied Catherine, and after two or three movements of her head up and down, she went out slowly and silently, as she had come in.

Charlotte, troubled by the penetrating glance of those eyes, dilated like those of the cat or the panther—though this dilation did not take anything from the depth of the glance—Charlotte, I say, allowed her to go away without saying a word, hardly daring to breathe until she had heard the door close behind the Queen, and Dariole had come to tell her that the dread apparition had really vanished.

"Dariole," she then remarked, "bring a chair close to my bed and sleep there to-night, I beg of you, for I dare not be left alone."

Dariole obeyed; but, spite of the company of her waiting-woman, and of the lamp which she ordered to be left alight for greater security, Madame de Sauve, like Marguerite, did not sleep until dawn, so haunted were her ears by the harsh tones of Catherine's voice.

Marguerite, however, though she had not slept until morning, awoke at the first call of the bugles and the barking of the dogs.

She rose immediately and began to don a costume as *négligé* as it was handsome. Then she called her women and bade them summon to her ante-chamber the King of Navarre's usual attendants; next opening the door which confined with the same key Henri and La Mole, she bade the latter good-morning warmly, and calling her husband:

"Come, sire," she said, "to have deceived my mother is not all we have to do, you must also persuade your whole court of the perfect understanding that exists between us. But do not be alarmed," she added, laughing, "and pay good heed to my words, which the circumstances render almost solemn: To-day will be the last time that I shall put your Majesty to this cruel test."

The King of Navarre smiled and ordered his gentlemen to be brought in.

It was not until they were greeting him that he pretended to notice that his cloak had remained on the Queen's bed; he apologised for receiving them in this fashion, took the cloak from the hands of Marguerite, who blushed as she handed it to him, and clasped it on his shoulder. Then, turning to them, he enquired the news of the city and the court.

Marguerite was observing out of the corner of her eye the astonishment depicted on the faces of the gentlemen at the intimacy between the King and Queen of Navarre which had just been disclosed, when an usher entered, followed by three or four gentlemen, and announced the Duc d'Alençon.

To secure his arrival, Gillonne had only needed to tell him that the King had spent the night with his wife.

François entered so hastily as almost to knock down those who preceded him. His first glance was for Henri, the second only for Marguerite.

Henri replied by a courteous salute. Marguerite composed her countenance,

which expressed the most perfect calmness.

With another vague yet scrutinising glance the Duke then surveyed the whole apartment; he saw the bed with its coverings in disorder, the two pillows upon the bolster, the King's hat thrown on a chair.

He turned pale, but immediately recovering himself:

"My brother Henri," said he, "are you coming to play tennis with the King this morning?"

"Does the King do me the honour of having chosen me," asked Henri, "or is it only an attention on your own part?"

"Why, no, the King has not spoken about it," said the Duke, a trifle disconcerted; "but do you not usually make one of his set?"

Henri smiled, for such grave events had happened since his last game with the King that there would have been nothing surprising if Charles IX. had changed his usual players.

"I will go, brother!" said Henri smiling.

"Come, then," replied the Duke.

"Are you going away?" asked Marguerite.

"Yes, sister."

"Are you in a hurry, then?"

"In a great hurry."

"But if I wanted you for a few minutes?"

Such a request from Marguerite's mouth was so rare, that her brother looked at her, growing red and pale by turns.

"What is she going to say to him?" thought Henri, no less astonished than the Duc d'Alençon.

Marguerite, as though guessing her husband's thoughts, turned to him.

"Monsieur," she said, with a charming smile, "you can go and join his Majesty if you wish, for the secret which I have to disclose to my brother is known to you already, since the request which I addressed to you in connection with that secret has been refused by your Majesty. I do not wish, therefore, to weary your Majesty by expressing for the second time in your presence a desire which you seemed to find it disagreeable to comply with."

"What is it all about?" asked François, looking at them both in astonishment.

"Ah! ah!" said Henri, reddening with

vexation, "I know what you mean, Madame. I assure you I regret that I am not more free in the matter. But if I am unable to show M. de La Mole a hospitality which could afford him any security, I can nevertheless join my recommendation with your own to my brother of Alençon on behalf of *the person in whom you are interested*. Perhaps," added he—to give even more emphasis to the words which we have just underlined—"perhaps my brother will even hit on some idea which will permit you to keep M. de La Mole . . . here . . . close to you . . . which would be better still, would it not, Madame?"

"Come, come," said Marguerite to herself, "between the two of them I shall get that done which neither of the two would do by himself."

And she opened the door of the closet and made the wounded man come out, after saying to her husband:

"It is for you, Monsieur, to explain to my brother the grounds on which we feel an interest in M. de La Mole."

Henri, thus driven into a corner, related in two words to M. d'Alençon, who was half a Protestant through the spirit of opposition, just as Henri was half a Catholic from motives of prudence—the arrival of La Mole in Paris, and how the young man had been wounded in coming to deliver him a letter from M. d'Auriac.

When the Duke turned round, La Mole was standing before him.

François, on seeing him so handsome and so pale—doubly attractive, therefore, both by his beauty and his paleness—felt the birth within his breast of a new source of alarm. Marguerite would work upon him both through his jealousy and his self-love.

"My brother," said she, "I guarantee that this young gentleman will be useful to anyone who employs him. Should you accept his services, he will find in you a powerful master, and you in him a devoted servant. In these times it is well to be surrounded with faithful followers, especially," she added, lowering her voice so that only the Duc d'Alençon could hear, "when one is ambitious and has the misfortune to be but the third Son of France."

She laid her finger on her mouth to intimate to François that, in spite of this

opening, she was still reserving an important part of her thoughts.

Then she added:

"Perhaps you will think quite differently from Henri, that it is not seemly that this young man should reside quite so close to my apartment."

"Sister," said François eagerly, "Monsieur de La Mole, if it is quite convenient to you, shall be installed within half an hour in my apartments, where I believe he will have nothing to fear. Let him love me, and I will love him."

François spoke falsely, for at the bottom of his heart he already detested La Mole.

"Good . . . I was not mistaken then," murmured Marguerite, as she saw the King of Navarre frown. "Ah! to lead the two of you, I see that I must lead one by means of the other."

Then, completing her thought:

"Come," she continued, "well done, Marguerite, as Henriette would say."

In point of fact, half an hour later, La Mole, after being seriously given his cue by Marguerite, kissed the border of her robe and ascended, fairly briskly for one who was wounded, the staircase leading to the quarters of M. d'Alençon.

Two or three days elapsed, during which the agreement between Henri and his wife appeared to become more firmly established. It had been conceded that Henri should not make a public abjuration, but he recanted privately to the King's Confessor, and attended Mass every morning at the Louvre. In the evening he went ostensibly to his wife's apartment, entered by the principal door, talked with her for a few minutes, then went out by the small secret door, and went up to Madame de Sauve, who had not failed to inform him of Catherine's visit, and of the undoubted danger that threatened him. Henri accordingly, thus informed on these two points, was more suspicious than ever of the Queen-Mother, and with all the more reason since Catherine's countenance insensibly began to smoothe, until one morning a kind smile even dawned on her pale lips. That day he found the greatest difficulty in deciding to eat anything except the eggs which he had got cooked for himself or to drink anything but the water which he had seen drawn from the Seine under his own eyes.

The massacres continued, but in

diminishing quantity; there had been such a great slaughter of the Huguenots that their numbers had been greatly reduced. The majority were dead, several had escaped, some had remained in hiding.

Occasionally a loud clamour would arise in one or other quarter of the city, when one of these latter was discovered. The execution was then private or public, according as the unhappy victim had been driven to bay in a place whence there was no escape or was able to flee. In the latter case, it was an amusement for the whole district where the event took place; for instead of growing calmer by the extinction of their enemies, the Catholics became increasingly ferocious; and the fewer of them there were left, the more outrageous was their fury against this unfortunate remnant.

Charles IX. had taken great delight in hunting down the Huguenots, and when he had been unable to continue the chase himself, he enjoyed the sound of the pursuit being carried on by others.

One day, on returning from a game of mall, which, with hunting and tennis, was his favourite amusement, he came in to his mother with beaming face, followed by his usual company of courtiers.

"Mother," said he, embracing the Florentine, who, remarking his delight, had already tried to conjecture its cause, "Good news! What do you think? The illustrious carcase of the Admiral, which we thought lost, has been discovered!"

"Indeed," said Catherine.

"By the Lord! yes. You thought as I did, mother, did you not, that the dogs had made their wedding breakfast of it, but nothing of the sort. My people, my good, kind people, had an idea; they have strung up the Admiral on the great gibbet at Montfaucon."

"Upon the ground they threw him down
And now they've strung him up!"

"Well?" said Catherine.

"Well, my good mother," replied Charles, "I have always wished to see the dear man again since I learnt that he was dead. It is a fine day; the air is refreshing and the scent of flowers seems everywhere; I feel in the very best of

health; if you will, mother, we will go on horseback to Montfaucon."

"I would gladly go, my son," said Catherine, "had I not an appointment which I cannot miss; besides," she added. "we ought to invite the whole Court for a visit paid to a man of such importance as the Admiral: it will be an opportunity for those who watch to make some interesting observations. We shall see who come and who stop away."

"Upon my soul, mother, you are right; it will be much better to have the affair to-morrow, so issue your invitations and I will issue mine, or rather, we will invite nobody; we will merely say we are going, and then people will be free to go or not, as they please. Adieu, mother, I am going to blow the horn."

"You will tire yourself, Charles! Ambroise Paré is always warning you, and quite rightly, that it is too violent an exercise for you."

"Bah!" said Charles, "I should like to be certain of dying from no other cause but that, in which case I should bury everybody here, even including Henriot, who is destined one day to succeed all of us, according to what Nostradamus declares."

Catherine frowned.

"Son, son," said she, "mistrust especially such things as seem impossible, and, meanwhile, take care of yourself."

"Just a flourish or two to amuse my hounds, who are weary to death, poor beasts! I ought to have let them loose on the Huguenots; that would have pleased them."

And Charles left his mother's room, entered his Armoury, took down a horn and blew it with a vigour that would have done credit to Roland himself. The wonder was that such a blast could be produced by that weak and sickly body and those pallid lips.

Catherine was really waiting for someone, as she had told her son. As soon as he had gone out, one of her women came and spoke to her in a low tone. Catherine smiled and rose, bowed to the assembled courtiers, and followed the messenger. The Florentine René, the man to whom the King of Navarre had given so diplomatic a reception on the vigil of St. Bartholomew, had just entered her oratory.

"Ah! René, it is you," said Catherine, "I was waiting for you with impatience."

Réné bowed.

"You received the line I wrote to you yesterday?"

"I had that honour."

"Have you made a fresh trial, as I told you to do, of the horoscope drawn by Ruggieri, and which accords so well with that prophecy of Nostradamus, to the effect that my three sons shall all come to the throne? . . . For some days past, René, events have been much modified, and I have thought it possible that destiny might have become less threatening."

"Madame," replied René, shaking his head, "your Majesty is well aware that events cannot alter destiny; it is destiny, on the contrary, that rules events."

"You have, however, repeated the sacrifice, have you not?"

"Yes, Madame," answered René, "since to obey you is my first duty."

"Well, what is the result?"

"The same as before, Madame?"

"What! the black lamb still uttered its three cries?"

"It did, Madame."

"Foreshadowing three cruel deaths in my family!" faltered Catherine.

"Alas, yes!" said René.

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards, Madame, I found in its entrails that strange displacement of the liver which we had already noticed in the first two victims—that it pointed in the opposite direction, I mean."

"A change of dynasty. Still, still?" muttered Catherine. "We must fight against it however, René," continued she.

Réné shook his head.

"I have told your Majesty," he replied, "that Fate rules all things."

"That is your opinion?" said Catherine.

"Yes, Madame."

"Do you remember the horoscope of Jeanne d'Albret?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Just repeat it, for I have forgotten it."

"*Vives honorata, morieris reformidata, regina amplificabere.*"

"Which means, I believe: 'You will live honoured,' and she lacked the necessities of life, poor woman! 'You will die feared,' and we made a laughing stock of her! 'You will be greater even than you were as Queen,' and she is dead, and her grandeur rests in a grave to which we have forgotten so much as to put her name!"

"Madame, you are wrong in your interpretation of *vives honorata*. The Queen of Navarre did, in point of fact, live honoured, for she enjoyed, during life, the love of her children and the respect of her adherents, a love and respect all the more sincere, inasmuch as she was poor."

"Yes," said Catherine, "I will allow you the *vives honorata*, but the *morieris reformidata*, come, how will you explain that?"

"Explain it! nothing easier: 'You will die feared.'"

"Well, did she die feared?"

"So much so, Madame, that she would not now be dead, had not your Majesty feared her. Lastly, the final part, 'As Queen you will grow great, or be greater than you were as Queen'; that again is true, Madame, for, in exchange for the corruptible crown, she now enjoys, it may well be, as queen and martyr, the heavenly crown, and in addition to that, who yet knows the earthly future that may be in store for her posterity?"

Catherine was superstitious to excess. She was alarmed even more perhaps at René's coolness than at the persistence of the omens; and, as in her case, a false step was always an opportunity for surmounting the situation boldly, she remarked abruptly to René, with no transition except the silent working of her thoughts:

"Have the perfumes from Italy arrived?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You will send me a box of them?"

"Of which?"

"The last, those . . ."

Catherine paused.

"Those which the Queen of Navarre was so pleased with?"

"Exactly."

"There is no need to prepare them, is there, Madame? for your Majesty is now as skilful as I am."

"You think so?" said Catherine; "at any rate they are successful."

"Your Majesty has nothing more to say to me?" asked the perfumer.

"No, no," replied Catherine, thoughtfully; "I think not, at least. Should anything fresh occur in the sacrifices, let me know. By the bye, let us give up lambs, and let us try hens."

"Alas! Madame, I fear that changing the victims will not alter the omens."

"Do as I bid you."

Réné bowed, and went out.

Catherine sat for a moment buried in thought, then rose and entered her bedroom, where her ladies were waiting for her, and where she announced the expedition on the morrow to Montfaucon.

The news of this pleasure party was the talk of the Palace and the whole city that evening. The ladies had their most elegant costumes prepared, the gentlemen their weapons and horses of state. The merchants closed their shops and warehouses, and the loungers of the streets killed a few Huguenots here and there in honour of the occasion, in order to be able to give a fitting accompaniment to the corpse of the Admiral.

There was a great hubbub throughout the evening and a great part of the night.

La Mole had spent a most miserable day in succession to three or four others no less wretched.

M. d'Alençon, in order to comply with Marguerite's wishes, had installed him in his apartments, but had not seen him since. He felt himself, like some poor forsaken child, suddenly deprived of the tender, delicate, and charming attentions of two women, of one of whom the mere remembrance incessantly devoured his thoughts. True, he had had news of her through Ambroise Paré, the surgeon, whom she had sent to visit him; but this news, transmitted through a man of fifty, who ignored or affected to ignore the interest taken by La Mole in the slightest detail that concerned Marguerite, was very incomplete and unsatisfying. It is true that Gillonne had come once—on her own account, of course—to learn how the patient was going on. This visit had produced the effect of a ray of light in a dungeon, and La Mole had remained dazzled by it, in constant expectation of a second appearance, which, however, though two days had elapsed since the first, failed to come.

Accordingly, when the news of this splendid gathering of the whole Court on the morrow reached the convalescent, he sent a request to M. d'Alençon, that he might be allowed to attend him.

The Duke did not even ask if La Mole was in a condition to bear the fatigue, but merely replied:

"By all means; let him have one of my horses."

That was all La Mole wanted. Ambroise Paré came, as usual, to dress his wounds. La Mole explained to him the necessity for his mounting on horseback, and asked him to take extra care in putting on the bandages. The two wounds had now closed, and that in the shoulder alone gave him pain. Both were red, as wounds in process of healing should be. Master Ambroise Paré covered them with a gummed court-plaster, much in vogue at that period for such cases, and promised La Mole that all would go well, provided he did not exert himself unduly during the expedition.

La Mole was filled with joy. Apart from a certain weakness owing to loss of blood, and a slight giddiness due to the same cause, he felt as well as possible. Marguerite, besides, would doubtless form one of the cavalcade, and he would see her once more, and when he reflected how much good the sight of Gillonne had done him, he did not doubt that to see her mistress would prove more efficacious still.

He therefore employed part of the money which he had received on leaving his family in buying the most handsome tunic of white satin and the most richly-embroidered cloak which a fashionable tailor could procure for him. The same man also supplied him with boots of scented leather, such as were worn at this date. These were all brought to him in the morning, only half an hour after the time at which La Mole had ordered them to be sent, so that he had no cause for complaint. He dressed quickly, looked at himself in the glass, and was well satisfied with his dress and general appearance, and finally assured himself by taking several turns quickly round his room that, although he still felt considerable pain, his mental happiness would silence his bodily indisposition.

A cherry-coloured cloak, of his own suggestion, cut somewhat longer than they were then worn, suited him particularly well.

While this scene was passing at the Louvre, another of the same kind was taking place at the Hôtel de Guise. A tall, red-haired gentleman was examining in the glass a reddish line which crossed his face in an unpleasant manner, was combing and perfuming his moustaches, and spreading a triple layer of white and red powder on that unfortunate line

which, spite of all the cosmetics in use at that period, persisted in reappearing. When all these applications proved insufficient, an idea occurred to him; a blazing August sun was pouring its rays on the courtyard; he therefore went down and walked up and down in it for ten minutes, his hat in his hand, his nose in the air, and his eyes closed, exposing himself voluntarily to the sun's fierce beams.

This exposure soon produced a complexion so brilliant that the red line was now too pale to be in harmony with the rest of his face, and appeared yellow by contrast! Our gentleman appeared none the less satisfied with this rainbow effect, and, thanks to a layer of vermilion spread over the scar, he made it match its surroundings very fairly well. After this he donned a magnificent coat, which a tailor had placed in his room before he had so much as asked for a tailor.

Thus adorned, scented, and armed from head to foot, he went down for the second time into the courtyard and began to caress a large black horse, whose beauty would have been peerless but for a small scar, resembling that of his rider, which he had received from a cavalryman's sabre in one of the battles of the late Civil War.

Equally delighted, however, with his horse as he was with himself, this gentleman, whom our readers have doubtless recognised without difficulty, was in the saddle a quarter of an hour before anyone else, and made the courtyard of the Hôtel de Guise resound with his courser's neighs, responded to, in proportion as he gained control over it, by exclamations of '*Sdeath!*' uttered in various tones.

After a few moments the horse, completely subdued, recognised by ready obedience the lawful authority of its rider; but this victory had not been achieved without noise, and this noise—as our gentleman had probably calculated upon—had attracted to the window a lady whom our tamer of steeds saluted with a deep reverence, and who smiled upon him in most gracious fashion.

Five minutes later Madame de Nevers summoned her steward.

"Monsieur," she asked, "has the Comte Hannibal de Coconnas breakfasted well?"

"Yes, Madame," answered the steward;

"he has even eaten this morning with better appetite than usual."

"Good, sir," said the Duchess.

Then, turning to her chief gentleman:

"Monsieur d'Arguzon," she said, "let us start for the Louvre, and keep an eye, I beg you, on the Comte Hannibal de Coconnas, as he is wounded, and consequently weak, and I would not for all the world have him take any harm, since that would excite the ridicule of the Huguenots, who bear him ill-will since that fortunate Eve of St. Bartholomew."

And Madame de Nevers, in her turn, mounting her horse, started with radiant face for the Louvre, which was fixed as the general place of meeting.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when a long cavalcade on horseback, glittering with gold, jewels, and splendid robes, appeared in the Rue Saint-Denis, debouching at the turning to the Cemetery of the Innocents, and winding beneath the sun's rays between the rows of gloomy houses on either side like some enormous reptile with gleaming coils.

CHAPTER XVI

A DEAD ENEMY HAS AYE A PLEASANT SAVOUR

NO procession of modern times, however splendid, can convey any idea of the magnificence of this spectacle. The rich and gorgeous robes of silk, the use of which on State occasions was handed down by François I. to his successors, had not yet been superseded by the scanty and sombre garments in vogue in the reign of Henri III.; consequently the costume of Charles IX., less sumptuous, but perhaps more elegant than those of the periods preceding, glittered in all its perfect harmony. No comparison with such a cavalcade is possible in our own day, since we have to fall back upon symmetry and uniformity when we wish to make any magnificent display.

Pages, esquires, gentlemen of inferior rank, dogs and horses, walking at the sides and in the rear of this royal procession, swelled it into a veritable army. Behind this army came the people or

rather, to be more accurate, the people were everywhere.

They followed, they walked by the side and in the front; they shouted simultaneously *Noël* and *Haro*, for in this *cortège* were to be seen several Huguenots, who were jeered at by the malicious mob.

In the morning, in the presence of Catherine and the Duc de Guise, Charles had spoken before Henri de Navarre, as though it were quite a natural thing to do, of going to inspect the gibbet of Montfaucon, or rather, the mutilated body of the Admiral which was suspended there. Henri's first impulse had been to excuse himself from taking part in the expedition. That was what Catherine was waiting for. At the first words in which he expressed his repugnance to the proposal, she exchanged a glance and a smile with the Duc de Guise. Henri intercepted both the glance and the smile, and understood their meaning, whereupon, suddenly correcting himself, he exclaimed:

"Why should I not go, after all? I am a Catholic, and I owe it to my new religion to do so."

Then, addressing Charles IX.:

"Your Majesty may reckon upon me," said he; "I shall be always glad to accompany you wherever you go."

And he glanced rapidly round him to see how many frowned.

Accordingly, among this whole cavalcade, the person who was perhaps the object of the greatest curiosity was this motherless son, this King without a kingdom, this Huguenot who had turned Catholic. His long, characteristic face, his rather common figure, his familiarity towards his inferiors—a familiarity bred of the mountaineering habits of his youth, and which he preserved to the end of his life—all these things marked him out to the spectators, some of whom shouted:

"To Mass, Henriot, to Mass."

To which Henri replied:

"I was there yesterday, I was there to-day, and I shall be there to-morrow. Egod! it seems to me that's enough."

As for Marguerite, she was on horseback, looking so beautiful, so fresh and elegant, that round her rose a chorus of admiration, some notes of which, it must be admitted, were addressed to her companion, the Duchesse de Nevers, who had just joined her, and whose white steed

shook his head violently, as though proud of the burden which he bore.

"Well, Duchess, what news?" said the Queen of Navarre.

"None that I know of, Madame," said the Duchess, aloud.

Then, in a lower tone:

"What has become of your Huguenot?" she asked.

"I have found him a place of safety," answered Marguerite. "And what have you done with your friend who killed so many people?"

"He insisted on taking part in this performance; he is riding my husband's charger, a horse as big as an elephant. He is an astounding horseman. I allowed him to come because I thought your Huguenot would be prudent enough to keep his room, and so there would be no fear of his meeting him."

"Oh! as to that," said Marguerite, with a smile, "even if he were here—which he is not—I don't think they would fight. My Huguenot is a handsome lad, but nothing more—a pigeon, not a kite—he coos, he does not bite. After all," said she in an indescribable tone, and with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "after all, perhaps we thought him a Huguenot while all the time he is a Brahmin, and his religion forbids him to shed blood."

"But where is the Duc d'Alençon?" asked Henriette, "I don't see him."

"He will join us; he had a pain in his eyes this morning, and wanted not to come; but as it is known that, in order to take a different line from his brothers Charles and Henri, he leans towards the Huguenots, it was represented to him that the King would take his absence in bad part, and so he determined to come. Why, see, they are shouting down there; it must be he just coming through the *Porte Montmartre*."

"Yes, it is, I recognise him," said Marguerite. "How smart he looks to-day: he has been taking great pains with his appearance for some time; he must be in love. See how nice it is to be a Prince of the blood; he gallops into everybody, and they all clear out of his way."

"Look out! he is going to ride us down as well," said Marguerite, laughing. "Make your gentleman move aside, Duchess, for there is one of them who will get killed if he doesn't move."

"Why! it is my intrepid hero!" cried the Duchess, "just look."

Coconnas had, in point of fact, left his rank in order to get close to Madame de Nevers; but at the very moment when his horse was crossing the kind of outer boulevard separating the Rue Saint-Denis from the Faubourg of the same name, a horseman in the train of the Duc d'Alençon, vainly endeavouring to check his horse, charged full against Coconnas. The shock caused Coconnas to totter on his colossal steed, his hat nearly came off, but he managed to save it, and turned round with fury.

"Why, Lord! it is M. de la Mole!" said Marguerite, stooping to her friend's ear.

"That pale, handsome young fellow!" cried the Duchess, unable to overcome her first impression.

"Yes, yes! the very man who nearly upset your Piedmontese."

"Oh! but something terrible will happen," said the Duchess; "they are glaring at one another; they recognise each other!"

Coconnas, on turning round, had indeed recognised the features of La Mole, and in his surprise had let go of his bridle, for he thought that he had certainly killed his former companion, or at least completely disabled him. La Mole, on his side, recognised Coconnas, and felt his face begin to burn. During a few seconds, which sufficed to express all the emotions felt by the two men, they exchanged glances which made the two women shudder. After which, La Mole, looking all round him and realising, no doubt, that the opportunity was not favourable for an explanation, set spurs to his horse and rejoined the Duc d'Alençon. Coconnas remained for a moment furiously twisting his moustaches to a point, after which, seeing that La Mole had gone off without saying a word, he, too, continued his march.

"Ah!" said Marguerite, with contemptuous regret, "I was not mistaken, then . . . this time it was quite evident that he lacks courage."

And she bit her lips until the blood came.

"He is very good-looking," answered the Duchess, pityingly.

The Duc d'Alençon had by now just reached his place behind the King and the Queen-Mother, and his gentlemen, in order to keep with him, were obliged to

pass in front of Marguerite and the Duchesse de Nevers. When it came to La Mole's turn to pass the two princesses, he raised his hat, saluted the Queen by bowing to his horse's neck, remaining bare-headed until her Majesty should honour him by a look.

Marguerite, however, proudly turned her head away.

La Mole doubtless read the expression of disdain upon the Queen's face, for, from being pale, he became livid, and was even obliged to grasp his horse's mane to save himself from falling.

"See what you have done, you cruel woman!" said Henriette to the Queen; "why, he is going to be ill! . . ."

"That is all that was required to complete the exhibition," said the Queen, with a crushing smile. ". . . Have you any smelling-salts?"

But Madame de Nevers was wrong.

La Mole, who had staggered, recovered his strength, and, once more reseating himself firmly in the saddle, resumed his place behind the Duc d'Alençon.

The procession continued to advance until the gloomy outline of the great gallows erected by Enguerrand de Marigny came in sight. Never had it been so well furnished as at the present moment.

The ushers and guards marched in front, and formed a large circle round the enclosure. At their approach the ravens perched upon the gibbet flew off with croaks of disappointment.

On ordinary occasions the gibbet of Montfaucon furnished a shelter behind its columns to the dogs attracted by a frequent prey, and to philosophic thieves who came to meditate upon the sad vicissitudes of fortune.

But to-day there were at Montfaucon, apparently at least, neither dogs nor thieves. The ushers and the guards had driven away the former at the same time as the ravens, while the latter had mingled with the crowd in order to carry out some of those good strokes of business which form the pleasant vicissitudes of their profession.

The procession advanced; the King and Catherine were the first to arrive, followed in succession by the Duc d'Anjou, the Duc d'Alençon, the King of Navarre, M. de Guise, and their gentlemen; next came Marguerite, the Duchesse de Nevers, and all the ladies

composing what may be termed the flying squadron of the Queen; in the rear followed pages, esquires, serving-men and populace, in all some ten thousand persons.

From the principal gibbet hung a shapeless form, a dark body, smeared and streaked with congealed blood, and mud whitened by successive layers of dust. The body was headless, and had consequently been suspended by the feet. The populace, with its usual ingenuity, had replaced the head with a bunch of straw, over which had been placed a mask, and in the mouth of this mask some wag, who knew the Admiral's habits, had inserted a tooth-pick.

A spectacle at once gloomy and curious was furnished by all these elegant noblemen and all these fair ladies passing along, like one of the processions painted by Goya, amid blackening skeletons and gibbets with their long lean arms. The more noisy the delight of the visitors became, the more did it contrast with the gloomy silence and cold insensibility of these corpses, the butt of ghastly jests at which even those who made them shuddered.

Many found it almost beyond endurance to bear the dreadful sight; among the group of assembled Huguenots it was easy to distinguish, by his paleness, Henri, who, however great his power of self-control and dissimulation, was unable to support the sight. Alleging as an excuse the foul smell proceeding from all these human remains, he approached Charles IX., who, side by side with Catherine, had stopped in front of the body of the Admiral, and observed: "Don't you think, sire, that this poor corpse smells too badly to allow us to stay here any longer?"

"You think so, Henriot?" said Charles, whose eyes sparkled with a fierce joy.

"Yes, sire!"

"Well, I don't agree with you . . . to my mind the corpse of an enemy smells always pleasant."

"Upon my word, sire," said Tavannes, "since your Majesty knew that we were to pay a little visit to the Admiral, you should have invited Pierre Ronsard, your professor of poetry; he would have composed an epitaph on the spot for old Gaspard."

"We don't require him in order to do that," said Charles, "and we will make

one ourselves . . . For instance," said the King, after a moment's reflection, "listen to this, gentlemen:

"Here lies—nay! we must change the word

Too flattering to the dead;

Here *hangs* the Admiral, by his feet

Because he's lost his head."

"Bravo, bravo!" cried the Catholic gentlemen in chorus, while the Huguenots frowned in silence.

As for Henri, he was talking to Marguerite and Madame de Nevers, and pretended not to hear.

"Come, come, Monsieur," said Catherine, beginning to be overcome by the horrible odour in spite of the perfumes with which she was covered "one must part from even the best company; let us bid farewell to the Admiral and return to Paris."

She nodded her head ironically as when one takes leave of a friend, and resuming her place at the head of the column, turned to regain the road, while the procession defiled past the corpse of Coligny.

The sun was declining on the horizon.

The crowd followed in the wake of their Majesties in order to enjoy to the utmost the magnificence of the cavalcade and all the details of the spectacle; the thieves followed the crowd, and ten minutes after the King's departure there was not a soul left near the mangled corpse of the Admiral, upon which the evening breeze was just beginning to blow.

When we say not a soul, we are mistaken. A gentleman mounted on a black horse, who doubtless had been unable to get a comfortable view of that shapeless and blackened trunk at the moment when it was honoured by the presence of the Royal visitors, had remained until the last, and was amusing himself by examining every detail of the chains, cramp-irons, stone pillars, of the whole gibbet in short, which doubtless appeared to him—newly arrived in Paris and ignorant of the perfection to which everything in the Capital was brought—the paragon of the ugliest thing man ever invented.

We need not inform our readers that this person was our friend Coconnas. A woman's trained eye had sought for him in vain among the cavalcade, and scanned the ranks without being able to discover him.

M. de Coconnas, as we have said, was at that moment standing in ecstasy before the masterpiece of Enguerrand de Marigny.

But this woman was not the only person who was looking for M. de Coconnas. Another gentleman, conspicuous in his white satin doublet and splendid plumes, after looking in front and at the sides of the procession, bethought himself to look behind, and saw the tall stature of Coconnas and his giant steed sharply outlined against the sky, reddened by the last reflections of the setting sun.

Hereupon the gentleman in the white satin doublet left the road taken by the rest of the cavalcade, struck off down a small path and reached the gibbet by a circuitous course.

Almost immediately, the lady whom we have recognised for the Duchesse de Nevers, as we recognised the tall gentleman with the black horse for Coconnas, approached Marguerite and said to her :

"We were both mistaken, Marguerite, for the Piedmontese has stayed behind, and M. de La Mole has gone after him."

"Od's life! something will happen then," said Marguerite laughing. "Upon my word, I confess that I shall not be sorry to have to go back on his account."

Marguerite turned round just in time to see La Mole turn back along the path.

It was now the turn of the two princesses to desert the cavalcade: the opportunity for doing so was most favourable, as they were just winding round at a place where the road was joined by a path. This path, which was bordered by high hedges, was an ascending one, and passed within thirty yards of the gibbet. Madame de Nevers whispered a word to her captain, Marguerite signed to Gilonne, and all four turned up this path and concealed themselves behind the thicket nearest to the spot where the scene of which they wished to be spectators would take place. Here, as we have said, they were about thirty yards from where Coconnas was gesticulating in ecstasy in front of the Admiral's dead body.

All dismounted, the Captain holding the bridles of the four horses. The thick turf afforded the three ladies a seat such as princesses often demand in vain.

An open space allowed them not to lose a single detail of the scene.

La Mole had made his *détour*. He walked his horse up to Coconnas from behind and tapped him on the shoulder.

The Piedmontese turned round.

"Oh!" said he, "it was not a dream then, and you are still alive."

"Yes, sir, I am still alive, though through no fault of yours."

"Sdeath!" replied Coconnas, "I recognise you, very well, in spite of your pale looks. You were redder than that the last time we met."

"And I," said La Mole, "recognise you, too, in spite of that yellow line across your face; you were paler than you are now when I made it."

Coconnas bit his lips, but determining apparently to maintain the conversation in ironical style, he continued :

"It is strange, Monsieur de La Mole, is it not, especially for a Huguenot, to be able to look at the Admiral suspended from that iron hook, and yet that there should be found people who exaggerate so much as to accuse us of having killed them all, down to the little children at the breast!"

"Comte," said La Mole, bowing, "I am no longer a Huguenot, I have the good fortune to be a Catholic."

"Bah!" cried Coconnas, with a burst of laughter, "you have become converted, sir; that is very clever of you!"

"Monsieur," continued La Mole as seriously and politely as before, "I had vowed to abjure if I escaped being massacred."

"Comte," replied the Piedmontese, "it was a very prudent vow, and I congratulate you upon it; have you made any other vows?"

"Yes, sir, I have made a second vow," replied La Mole, caressing the hilt of his sword with perfect calmness.

"What is it?" asked Coconnas.

"To hang you up there, look you, on that small hook beneath Monsieur de Coligny, which seems to be waiting for you."

"What!" said Coconnas, "all alive, as I am now?"

"No, sir, after I have run my sword through your body."

Coconnas grew purple and his eyes darted flames.

"To that nail?" said he, in a bantering tone.

"Yes," replied La Mole, "to that nail . . ."

"You are not tall enough for that, my little fellow!" said Coconnas.

"Then I will mount upon your horse, my big killer of men!" answered La Mole. "Ah! you fancy, my dear Monsieur Hannibal de Coconnas, that you can assassinate people with impunity on the loyal and honourable pretext that you are a hundred to one. Not so; there comes a day when man meets man, and that day, I believe, has arrived. I should much have liked to crack your ugly skull with a pistol-shot, but I should aim badly, for my hand still trembles from the wounds you dealt me in such a dastardly fashion."

"My ugly skull!" roared Coconnas, leaping from his horse. "Down with you, Monsieur le Comte, and let us draw." And he grasped his sword.

"I believe your Huguenot said 'ugly skull,'" whispered the Duchesse de Nevers to Marguerite; "do you think him ugly?"

"He is delightful!" said Marguerite, laughing, "and I am obliged to admit that M. de La Mole's anger makes him unjust; but, hush! let us look!"

La Mole had, in point of fact, dismounted as rapidly as Coconnas had done; he had unfastened his cherry-coloured cloak and laid it on the ground, and, drawing his sword, was standing on guard.

"Oh! dear!" he cried, as he extended his arm.

"Oh!" growled Coconnas, as he stretched out his. Both of them, be it remembered, were wounded in the shoulder, and any sudden movement caused them pain.

A burst of ill-checked laughter came from the thicket. The Princesses had not been able entirely to restrain themselves on seeing the two champions rubbing their shoulder-blades with pained grimaces. This laughter reached the ears of the two gentlemen, who were ignorant that there were any witnesses of the scene, and who, on turning round, recognised their ladies.

La Mole resumed his guard, firm as an automaton, and Coconnas crossed the other's sword with a most emphatically pronounced '*Sdeath!*'

"Why! but they are going at it in good earnest, and there will be murder done unless we put a stop to it; we have had enough of joking. Ho! there, gentlemen!" cried Marguerite.

"Let them alone!" said Henriette, who, having seen Coconnas at work, hoped at the bottom of her heart that he would make as short work of La Mole as he had done of Mercandon's son and nephews.

"Oh! they really look splendid like that," said Marguerite; "just look; you would say they were breathing fire."

In point of fact, the combat, begun with jeers of provocation, had become a silent one the moment that the champions had crossed swords. Each man mistrusted his strength, and each was obliged, after every quick movement, to repress a shudder of pain aroused by his old wounds. La Mole, however, with eyes fixed and blazing, with lips parted and teeth clenched, was advancing with firm, quick steps upon his opponent, who, recognising in him a master in the use of weapons, gave way, step by step, but still gave way. The two combatants arrived in this way at the edge of the ditch, on the other side of which were the spectators. There, just as though his retreat had been purposely arranged so as to bring him close to his lady, Coconnas stopped, and La Mole, disengaging his weapon at somewhat too wide a distance, delivered a direct thrust with the rapidity of lightning, and at the same moment La Mole's white satin tunic was soaked with a red stain, which continued to grow larger and larger.

"Courage!" cried the Duchesse de Nevers.

"Ah! poor La Mole!" exclaimed Marguerite, with a cry of grief.

La Mole heard this cry, threw at the Queen one of those glances which penetrate the heart more deeply than the point of the sword, and lunged to his full extent.

This time both women uttered a simultaneous cry. The bleeding point of La Mole's rapier had appeared at Coconnas's back.

Neither of them, however, had fallen; both remained on their feet, looking at one another open-mouthed, each feeling that the slightest movement on his part would make him lose his balance. At last the Piedmontese, more dangerously wounded than his opponent, and feeling that his strength was escaping with his blood, let himself fall upon La Mole, clasping him with one arm, while with the other he tried to draw his dagger.

La Mole, on his side, summoned all his strength, raised his hand, and brought down the hilt of his sword full in the face of Coconnas, who fell, stunned by the blow; in falling, however, he dragged his opponent down with him, and both of them rolled into the ditch.

Marguerite and the Duchesse de Nevers, seeing that even in their dying state they were still endeavouring to kill each other, rushed towards them, aided by the Captain of the Guard. But before they had reached them, their hands relaxed their grasp, their eyes closed, and each of the combatants, letting fall his weapon, stiffened in a supreme convulsion. A large pool of blood surrounded each.

"Oh! brave, brave La Mole!" cried Marguerite, incapable of restraining her admiration any longer. "Ah! forgive me, I beg your pardon a thousand times for having suspected you." And her eyes filled with tears.

"Alas! alas! valorous Hannibal!" murmured the Duchess. . . . "Tell me, Madame, did you ever see two more intrepid lions?" And she burst into sobs.

"Zounds! shrewd strokes these!" said the Captain, trying to stanch the blood, which flowed in torrents. "Ho! there, you who are coming yonder, be quick, be quick!"

As he spoke, a man, seated in the forepart of a kind of tumbril painted red, appeared through the evening mist, chanting this old ballad, which the miraculous occurrence at the Cemetery of the Innocents had doubtless recalled to his memory:

Bel aubespın fleurissant,
Verdissant,
Le long de ce beau rivage,
Tu es vêtü, jusqu'au bas,
Des long bras
D'une lambrusche sauvage.

Le chantre rossignolet,
Nouvelet,
Courtisant sa bien-aimée,
Pour ses amours alléger,
Vient loger
Tous les ans sous ta ramée.

Or, vis, gentil aubespın,
Vis sans fin;
Vis, sans que jamais tonnerre,
Ou la cognée, ou les vents,
Ou le temps
Te puissent ruer par terre.

Thou white hawthorn, in mantle green,
Shading this bank with leafy screen,
The wild vine clothes thee to thy roots
With tender, twining, trailing shoots.

The nightingale that woos his mate,
Making his orisons so late,
To ease with song his love-sick breast,
Yearly beneath thy boughs doth rest.

Live on, live on, thou beauteous tree,
Live on to all eternity;
Nor stormy blast, nor woodman's blow,
Nor time's rude hand, e'er lay thee low.

"Halloa, there!" repeated the Captain, "why don't you come when you're called! Don't you see that these gentlemen need help?"

The man in the cart, whose forbidding exterior and coarse face formed a strange contrast with the sweet, idyllic song just quoted, stopped his horse at this, got down from the cart, and stooping over the two bodies:

"Those are fine wounds," said he, "but I have made some better ones."

"Who are you, then?" asked Marguerite, feeling involuntarily a certain terror which she had not the strength to overcome.

"Madame," replied the man, bowing to the ground, "I am Master Caboche, executioner to the Provost of Paris, and I have come to hang on this gibbet some companions for the Admiral yonder."

"Well! I am the Queen of Navarre; throw your corpses down there, spread the saddle-cloths of our horses in the bottom of your cart, and drive these two gentlemen gently back to the Louvre, while we go on in front."

CHAPTER XVII

A RIVAL TO MASTER AMBROISE PARÉ

THE tumbril in which Coconnas and La Mole had been placed, now turned back again on the road to Paris, following in the darkness the group of courtiers which led the way. On reaching the Louvre, the driver was given a lavish reward. The two wounded men were carried to the quarters of the Duc d'Alençon, and a messenger despatched for Master Ambroise Paré. Neither of the two wounded men had recovered

consciousness by the time the doctor arrived.

La Mole was the least badly handled; the sword had penetrated beneath the right arm-pit, but had not struck any vital organ; as for Coconnas, his lung was pierced, and the breath issuing from the wound made the flame of a candle flicker. Ambroise Paré would not answer for his recovery.

Madame de Nevers was in despair; it was she who, confident in the courage, skill, and strength of the Piedmontese, had prevented Marguerite from stopping the combat. She would have liked to have had Coconnas carried to the Hôtel de Guise, so that she might renew the care with which she had tended him on the first occasion, but her husband might arrive from Rome at any moment, and resent the presence of a stranger in his establishment.

In order to conceal the cause which had led to their being wounded, Marguerite had caused the two young men to be carried to her brother's apartments, saying that they had fallen from their horses during the expedition to Montfaucon; but the truth had leaked out, the Captain, who had witnessed the combat, having described it with admiration, and it was soon known at the Court that two new duellists had just sprung into fame.

Attended by the same surgeon, the two wounded men went through the different phases of convalescence corresponding more or less with the severity of their injuries. La Mole, who was the less seriously wounded of the two, was the first to recover consciousness. As for Coconnas, a violent fever had supervened, and his return to consciousness was marked by all the symptoms of the most violent delirium.

Although confined in the same room as Coconnas, La Mole, on regaining consciousness, had not noticed his companion, or, at any rate, had given no sign of having seen him. Coconnas, on the other hand, on first opening his eyes, fastened them on La Mole with an expression which proved that the blood which the Piedmontese had lost had in no degree diminished the passion of his fiery temperament.

Coconnas fancied that he was dreaming, and that in his dream he encountered the enemy, whom on two occasions he believed that he had killed; this dream,

however, was prolonged to an inordinate length. After seeing La Mole laid, like himself, upon a bed, and his wounds dressed, like his own, by the surgeon, he saw La Mole sit up in bed, though he himself was still confined to it by weakness, pain, and fever; soon he saw him get down from the bed, then walk, by the help of the surgeon's arm, and, finally, by his own unaided strength.

Coconnas, still delirious, watched all these different stages of his companion's convalescence with a glance sometimes stolid, sometimes furious, but always threatening.

The excited mind of the Piedmontese was thus haunted by an alarming combination of fancy and reality. He had thought La Mole dead, nay, twice dead, and yet he recognised La Mole's ghost lying in a bed like his own; next, as we have said, he saw this ghost get up, then walk, and, more alarming still, walk towards his own bed. This ghost, from which Coconnas would fain have fled, were it to hell itself, came straight towards him, and stopped at his pillow, erect, and gazing at him; there was even on the ghost's features an expression of tenderness and compassion, which Coconnas mistook for one of infernal mockery.

Thereupon was kindled in his mind, more diseased, perhaps, than his body, a blind desire for vengeance. Coconnas was filled with but one idea—namely, to procure a weapon of some description, and with this weapon to strike this body—or ghost—of La Mole which tortured him so cruelly. His clothes had been at first laid on a chair, but were afterwards removed, being quite soiled with blood, but on the same chair they had left his dagger, which nobody had any idea that he would before very long want to make use of. Coconnas saw the dagger; during three successive nights, taking advantage of La Mole's being asleep, he tried to reach it with his hand; three times did his strength fail him, and he fainted. At last, on the fourth night, he reached the weapon, grasped it with the end of his fingers, and, with a groan wrung from him by pain, hid it beneath his pillow.

On the next day he saw something unprecedented hitherto; the ghost of La Mole—which appeared to gather fresh strength every day, while he himself, perpetually haunted by this dreadful vision

exhausted his own strength in the everlasting endeavour to unravel this mystery—the ghost of La Mole, growing more and more active, took two or three thoughtful turns round the room; then presently, after arranging its cloak, girding on its sword, and placing on its head a wide-brimmed felt hat, opened the door and went out.

Coconnas breathed more freely; he believed himself rid of his phantom. For two or three hours his blood flowed more calmly through his veins and at a lower temperature than it had yet done since the moment of the duel; if La Mole had but kept away for a whole day, Coconnas would have become conscious; an absence of a week might, perhaps, have cured him; but, unfortunately, La Mole returned after two hours.

His return was a veritable dagger-thrust to the Piedmontese, and although La Mole did not come in unaccompanied, Coconnas did not bestow so much as a glance on his companion.

And yet the man who accompanied La Mole was well worth looking at.

He was a man of about forty, short, thick-set, and powerful, with black hair that came down to his eyebrows, and a dark beard which, contrary to the fashion of the day, covered the whole of the lower part of his face; the new comer, however, appeared to pay but little regard to fashion. He wore a kind of leather tunic stained with brown spots, red hose and belt, great leather ankle boots, a cap of the same colour as his hose, while his waist was encircled by a broad girdle from which hung a knife hidden in its sheath.

This strange character, whose presence in the Louvre seemed to be an anomaly, threw his brown cloak on a chair and walked abruptly up to the bed of Coconnas, whose eyes, as though by some curious fascination, remained fixed on La Mole, who stood at some distance. The new comer looked at the patient and then shook his head.

"You have waited a very long time, my gentleman," said he.

"I was not able to go out sooner," said La Mole.

"Egod! then you should have sent for me."

"By what messenger, I should like to know?"

"Ah! true! I was forgetting where

we are. I told those ladies, but they wouldn't listen to me. If my orders had been followed instead of those of that ass Ambroise Paré, you would long ago have been in a condition either to go on adventures together, or to have had another fight with each other if you wanted to do so. However, we shall see. Is your friend conscious?"

"Not completely."

"Put out your tongue, my gentleman."

Coconnas put out his tongue at La Mole with such a fearful grimace that the doctor shook his head a second time.

"Ah!" he murmured, "spasmodic contraction of the muscles; there is no time to lose. I will send you this evening a draught ready prepared, which you must make him take three times, at intervals of an hour; once at midnight, and again at two and three o'clock."

"Very well."

"But who will give him this draught?"

"I will."

"You yourself?"

"Yes."

"You promise?"

"On the word of a gentleman."

"And supposing some doctor should wish to take away a small portion in order to analyse it and see of what ingredients it is composed . . ."

"I will pour out every drop of it."

"Also on the word of a gentleman?"

"I swear it."

"By whom shall I send you the draught?"

"By anyone you choose."

"But my messenger . . ."

"Well?"

"How will he reach you?"

"I have thought of that. He will say that he comes from M. René the perfumer."

"The Florentine who lives on the Pont Saint-Michel?"

"Exactly: he has the *entrée* to the Louvre both by day and night."

The man smiled.

"That is certainly the least the Queen-Mother owes him. Very well, the messenger shall come from Master René the perfumer: there is no harm in my taking his name for once; he has exercised my trade often enough, without having a licence for it."

"I can rely upon you, then?" said La Mole.

"You can."

"As regards payment . . ."

"Oh! I will settle that with the gentleman himself when he gets about again."

"And make your mind easy, I believe he will be in a condition to reward you handsomely."

"I believe so, too. But," he added, with a peculiar smile, "as it is not the custom for people who do business with me to be grateful, it will not surprise me if, once upon his legs again, he should forget, or rather not care to remember me."

"Ha! ha!" said La Mole, smiling in his turn; "in that case I shall be there to refresh his memory."

"Well, be it so! In two hours you shall have the draught."

"Au revoir."

"What did you say?"

"Au revoir."

The man smiled.

"It is my custom always to say *adieu*," he replied. "Adieu, then, Monsieur de La Mole; you shall have the draught in two hours. You understand, it must be taken at midnight . . . in three doses . . . one every hour."

With these words he went out, leaving La Mole alone with Coconnas.

Coconnas had heard the whole conversation without in the least understanding its meaning; nothing but an empty jingle of words had reached his ear. Of the whole conversation he had grasped but one word—midnight.

He continued, therefore, gazing eagerly at La Mole, who remained in the room walking to and fro buried in thought.

The unknown doctor kept his promise, and at the appointed hour sent the draught, which La Mole placed on a small chafing-dish. Having taken this precaution, he lay down to rest.

This action on La Mole's part gave a little rest to Coconnas, who tried in his turn to close his eyes, but his feverish drowsiness was merely a continuation of his waking delirium. The same phantom which pursued him by day haunted him by night; through his dry eyelids he continued to see La Mole ever menacing him: then a voice repeated in his ear: "Midnight! midnight! midnight!"

He was suddenly aroused by the sound of the clock striking twelve. Coconnas opened his feverish eyes; the hot breath from his chest was devouring his parched

lips; an unquenchable thirst consumed his burning throat; the little lamp burned as usual, its faint light making a thousand phantoms dance before Coconnas's uncertain glance.

Hereupon he saw, to his consternation, La Mole get off his bed and, after taking a turn or two round the room—as the hawk which fascinates a bird—approach him with outstretched fist. Coconnas reached his hand towards his dagger, grasped it by the handle, and prepared to plunge it into his enemy. La Mole came nearer and nearer.

Coconnas muttered feebly:

"Ah! it is you, still you! Come on. Ah! you threaten me, you shake your fist, you smile! Come on! Ah! you still approach stealthily, step by step; come on, so that I may kill you."

And uniting the action with the threat, Coconnas did in fact, just as La Mole was stooping over him, draw the dagger from beneath his sheets, but the effort made by the Piedmontese to raise it exhausted his strength; the arm extended towards La Mole dropped half-way, the dagger fell from his flaccid hand, and he fell back in a dying state upon the pillow.

"Come, come," murmured La Mole, raising him gently and putting a cup to his lips, "drink this, my poor fellow, you are burning."

It was this cup which Coconnas had mistaken for the threatening fist created by the fancy of his disordered brain.

At the contact, however, with the velvety potion which moistened his lips and cooled his breast, Coconnas recovered his reason, or rather his instinct; he felt a sense of comfort stealing over him such as he had never experienced before; he threw a look of intelligence at La Mole, who was holding him in his arms and smiling at him, and from his eye, but lately contracted with gloomy rage, a small tear trickled down his hot cheek.

"Sdeath!" murmured Coconnas, sinking back upon the pillow, "if I get over this, Monsieur de La Mole, you shall be my friend."

"And you will get over it, my comrade," said La Mole, "if you will drink two more cups like that which I have just given you, and dream no more bad dreams."

An hour later, La Mole, self-appointed as sick-nurse, and punctually obeying the orders of the unknown doctor, got up a

second time, poured a second portion of the liquor into a cup, and brought it to Coconnas. But this time the Piedmontese, instead of awaiting him dagger in hand, welcomed him with open arms and swallowed the beverage with delight, after which, for the first time, he enjoyed a peaceful sleep.

The third cup produced a no less wonderful effect. The patient began to breathe regularly, though somewhat rapidly. His rigid limbs relaxed, a gentle moisture spread over the surface of his parched skin, and when Master Ambroise Paré visited the invalid next morning, he smiled with satisfaction and said :

"I will now answer for the safety of M. de Coconnas, and it will be one of the best cases I have cured."

The result of this scene—half tragic, half comic—which was not, however, without a certain affecting romance, regard being had to the ferocious disposition of Coconnas, was that the friendship between these two, begun at the inn of the *Belle-Etoile* and violently interrupted by the events of the night of St. Bartholomew, was resumed henceforth with fresh vigour, and soon surpassed that of Orestes and Pylades by a matter of five sword thrusts and one pistol shot distributed between their two bodies.

Be it as it may, their wounds, old as well as new, severe as well as trifling, were now at last in a fair way of becoming healed. La Mole, faithful to his mission as nurse, refused to leave Coconnas's room until he was completely cured. He lifted him in bed so long as weakness confined him to it, helped him to walk as soon as he was capable of that exertion, in short, paid him all that attention to which his gentle and loving nature prompted him, and which, backed up by the vigorous constitution of the Piedmontese, brought about a recovery more rapid than could reasonably have been looked for.

The two young men were tortured, however, by one and the same thought : each, during his delirious fever, imagined he had seen the lady who filled his whole heart approach him ; but it was quite certain that, since the time that each had become conscious, neither Marguerite nor Madame de Nevers had entered the room. Besides, the reason of this was obvious : could these women—the one the wife of

the King of Navarre, the other the sister-in-law of the Duc de Guise—show to the eyes of all so public a mark of interest in two simple gentlemen ? No : that clearly was the answer which La Mole and Coconnas must give to such a question. None the less was their absence, which might possibly be due to total forgetfulness, a cause of grief.

It is true that the Captain, who had assisted at the combat, had come from time to time, and, as though on his own initiative, to inquire how the two wounded men were going on. It is true that Gillonne, on her own account, had done the same ; but La Mole had not ventured to speak of Marguerite to the one, nor had Coconnas ventured to speak of Madame de Nevers to the other.

CHAPTER XVIII

RESURRECTION

FOR some time each of the two young men kept his secret locked within his breast. At last, becoming one day unusually confidential, the thought with which each was wholly taken up burst the barrier of their lips, and they cemented their friendship by that last proof, without which there is no true friendship, that is to say, by an entire exchange of confidence.

Both were distractedly in love, one with a Princess, the other with a Queen.

There was something appalling to the two poor lovers in the almost impassable distance which separated them from the objects of their desire. Yet hope is a sentiment so deeply rooted in the human breast, that, spite of the folly of their hope, they yet hoped.

Both of them, besides, as they grew stronger, began to pay great attention to their personal appearance. Every man—even the most indifferent to physical advantages—in certain circumstances, holds silent conversations with his mirror and exchanges glances of intelligence with it, after which he almost always goes off well satisfied with his interview. Well, our two young friends were not of those whose mirrors were likely to give them unpleasant news.

La Mole, pale and elegant, possessed the beauty of distinction; Coconnas, strapping and vigorous, with high colour, possessed the beauty of strength. Nay, more, in the case of Coconnas, his illness had improved him. He had grown thinner and more pale; and lastly, the celebrated gash which had caused him so much annoyance by the resemblance of its prismatic hues to a rainbow, had disappeared, in all probability heralding, like the post-diluvian phenomenon, a long succession of clear days and calm nights.

The two wounded men, moreover, continued to be surrounded by the most delicate attentions; on the day when each of them had been able to get up, he had found a dressing-gown on the chair nearest to his bed, and on the day on which he was able to dress, a complete costume. Further, in the pocket of each doublet was a well filled purse, which each of them kept, of course, only to restore it at the proper time and place to the unknown protector who watched over him.

This unknown patron could not be the Prince with whom the two young men were lodged, since not only had this Prince not once come up to see them, but had not even made inquiries as to their progress.

A vague hope whispered to the heart of each that this unknown protector was the woman whom he loved.

Accordingly the two invalids awaited with unexampled impatience the moment when they should be able to go out. La Mole, who was stronger, and further on the way to recovery, might have done so long ago, but a sort of tacit convention bound him to the fortunes of his friend. It had been agreed that they should devote the occasion of their first going out to the paying of three visits.

The first, to the unknown doctor whose velvety potion had wrought such a remarkable improvement in the inflamed chest of Coconnas.

The second, to the inn of the defunct Master La Hurière, where each had left his horse and valise.

The third, to René, the Florentine, who, uniting the business of sorcerer with that of perfumer, not only sold poisons and cosmetics, but also composed philtres, and delivered oracles.

At last, after two months of

convalescence spent in seclusion, the day so eagerly expected arrived.

We have said seclusion, and it is the right word to use, for, on several occasions, in their impatience, they had wanted to anticipate this day; but a sentry, stationed at their door, had barred their passage every time, and they were told that they must not go out without an *exeat* from Master Ambroise Paré.

Well, one day, the skilful surgeon, having recognised that his two patients were, if not completely cured, at least on the way to complete recovery, had granted this *exeat*, and at about two in the afternoon on one of those lovely autumn days which Paris occasionally affords to her astonished inhabitants, who have already resigned themselves to making preparation for the winter, the two friends issued arm in arm from the Louvre.

La Mole, who had been delighted at finding on a chair the famous cherry-coloured cloak which he had folded up so carefully before the fight, had constituted himself guide to Coconnas, who allowed himself to be led along without making any resistance and even without reflecting. He knew that his friend was taking him to the unknown doctor whose potion, though unpatented, had cured him in a single night, when all the drugs given by Master Ambroise Paré were slowly killing him. He had divided into two portions the money in his purse, that is to say, two hundred rose nobles, and with one hundred he intended to reward the anonymous Æsculapius to whom he owed his recovery. Coconnas, while not fearing death, was none the less pleased to be alive; accordingly, as we see, he was preparing to make a handsome recompense to the man who had saved his life.

La Mole took the Rue de l'Astruce, the Rue Saint-Honoré, the Rue des Prouvelles, and soon found himself in the Place des Halles. Near the ancient fountain, and at the spot designated at the present day by the name of the Carreau des Halles, rose an octagonal stone building surmounted by a large wooden lantern covered by a pointed roof, on the top of which was a creaking vane. This wooden lantern had eight openings, crossed, as the field of a coat-of-arms is crossed by the heraldic device termed a *fesse*, by a kind of wooden

wheel, divided in the middle so as to admit within the hollows cut for that purpose, the head and hands of the condemned criminal or criminals who were exposed to view at one or more of these eight apertures. This strange erection, which bore no resemblance to any of the surrounding buildings, was called the Pillory.

A house, shapeless, hunch-backed, tumble-down, lame, and one-eyed, its low-browed roof speckled with moss like the skin of a leper, had grown like some sort of ugly toadstool at the foot of this tower-like erection. It was the house of the public executioner.

A man was, on the present occasion, exposed to view, and was putting out his tongue at the passers-by; he was one of the thieves who had operated at the gibbet of Montfaucon, and had had the ill luck to be caught in the act of exercising his trade.

Coconnas thought that it was this curious sight which his friend had brought him to see, and he mingled with the crowd of gazers, who responded to the exposed man's grimaces by shouts and hooting.

Coconnas was naturally cruel, and this spectacle amused him greatly; only he would have preferred that, instead of shouts and hoots, stones should have been thrown at this criminal, who was so insolent as to put out his tongue at noble lords who did him the honour to visit him.

Accordingly, when the moving lantern turned on its base to delight another side of the square with a sight of the culprit, and the crowd followed the movement of the lantern, Coconnas wanted to follow the crowd, but La Mole stopped him and said *sotto voce*:

"This isn't what we have come here for."

"Why have we come then?" asked Coconnas.

"You shall see," answered La Mole.

So speaking, he led Coconnas straight to the little window of the house which rested against the tower. A man was leaning with his elbow on the window-sill.

"Ah! gentlemen, it is you!" said he, raising his red cap and baring his head with its dark thick hair descending to his eyebrows, "you are welcome."

"Who is this fellow?" asked Coconnas, trying to recall the past, for he fancied he had seen this head at some moment of his delirium.

"The man who saved your life, my dear friend," said La Mole, "the man who brought to the Louvre that refreshing draught which did you so much good."

"Oh!" said Coconnas, "in that case, my friend . . ."

And he extended his hand to him

But the man, instead of responding to this advance by putting out his own hand, drew himself up.

"Sir," said he to Coconnas, "thank you for the honour you wish to confer upon me, but if you knew who I am, you would probably refrain."

"Upon my word," said Coconnas, "I declare that, were you the Devil, I should consider myself under an obligation to you, for but for you I should be dead at this moment."

"I am not the Devil exactly," answered the man with the red cap, "but many people would often rather see the Devil than see me."

"Who are you, then?" asked Coconnas.

"Sir," replied the man, "I am Master Caboche, executioner to the Provost of Paris."

"Ah!" said Coconnas, withdrawing his hand.

"There, you see!" said Master Caboche.

"No! I will touch your hand, Devil! take me if I don't. Hold it out"

"Really?"

"Wide open."

"There!"

"Wider still . . . that's right!"

And Coconnas drew from his pocket the handful of gold prepared for his anonymous doctor, and placed it in the executioner's hand.

"I should have preferred your hand without anything in it," said Caboche, shaking his head, "for I have no lack of gold; but of hands to touch mine, on the contrary, I stand much in need. Never mind! God bless you, my gentleman."

"So then, my friend," said Coconnas, looking with curiosity at the executioner, "it is you who administer torture, who break on the wheel, who quarter bodies and cut off heads, and break bones. Ah! I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Sir," said Master Caboche, "I do not do everything myself; for, just as you gentlemen have your iackeys to do what you are unwilling to do, so I have my assistants to do the rough work and despatch the rascals. Only, when I happen to

have to deal with gentlemen—like you and your companion, for example—then it is quite another matter, and I do myself an honour in carrying out personally all the details of the execution from first to last, from preliminary question to decapitation."

Coconnas felt an involuntary shudder pass through his veins, as though the brutal screw were crushing his legs and the steel edge grazing his neck; La Mole, without examining the cause, experienced a similar sensation.

Coconnas, however, mastered this emotion, of which he felt ashamed, and wishing to take leave of Caboche with a final jest:

"Well, master!" said he, "I have your word that when my turn comes to mount the gallows of Enguerrand de Marigny or the scaffold of M. de Nemours, nobody but yourself shall touch me."

"I give you my promise."

"This time," said Coconnas, "here is my hand in token that I accept your promise."

And he extended to the executioner his hand, which the latter timidly touched, though it was evident that he had a great desire to grasp it heartily.

At the mere contact, Coconnas turned slightly pale, but the same smile remained on his lips; while La Mole, who was ill at ease, seeing the crowd turning along with the lantern and approaching them, pulled him by the cloak.

Coconnas, who, at bottom, was as anxious as La Mole to end this scene, into which, through the natural bent of his disposition, he had plunged further than he cared about, nodded his head and moved away.

"My word!" said La Mole, when he and his companion had reached the Croix du Trahoir, "agree with me that you breathe more freely here than in the Place des Halles?"

"I admit it," said Coconnas, "but all the same I am very glad to have made the acquaintance of Master Caboche; it is as well to have friends everywhere."

"Even at the sign of the *Belle-Etoile*," said La Mole, laughing.

"Oh! as for poor La Hurière," said Coconnas, "he's dead and no mistake. I saw the flash of the arquebus, I heard the bullet resound as though it had struck the great bell of Notre-Dame, and I left him lying in the gutter with the

blood streaming from his nose and mouth. Supposing him to be a friend, he is a friend whom we possess in the next world."

Chatting thus, the two young men entered the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec and made their way towards the sign of the *Belle Etoile*, which still creaked in the same place, offering to the traveller its gastronomic hearth and appetising legend.

Coconnas and La Mole expected to find the house in gloom, the widow in mourning, and the scullions with crape round their arms; but, to their great astonishment, the household was in full swing. Madame La Hurière quite resplendent, and the drawers blither than ever.

"Why! the faithless creature must have married again!" said La Mole.

Then, addressing this new Artemis:

"Madame," said he, "we are two gentlemen who were acquainted with poor M. La Hurière. We left two horses and two valises here, which we have come to claim."

"Gentlemen," answered the landlady, after a vain attempt to recall them to her mind, "as I have not the honour of knowing you I will call my husband, if you please, . . . Grégoire, call your master here."

Grégoire passed from the outer kitchen, which was, so to speak, the general pandemonium, into the inner room, which was the laboratory in which were composed the dishes which La Hurière, during his life-time, deemed worthy of being prepared by his own skilled hand.

"Deuce take it," muttered Coconnas, "but it makes me sorry to see this house so gay when it should be sad. Poor La Hurière!"

"He tried to kill me," said La Mole, "but I forgive him with all my heart."

La Mole had hardly uttered these words, when a man appeared holding in his hand a saucepan in which he was cooking some onions, which he stirred with a wooden spoon.

La Mole and Coconnas uttered a cry of surprise.

At this cry the man raised his head, and with a similar cry of surprise let fall his saucepan, retaining nothing in his hand but his wooden spoon.

"*In nomine Patris*," said the man, waving his spoon as though it had been a

holy water sprinkler, "*et Filii, et Spiritûs Sancti . . .*"

"Master La Hurière!" cried the young men.

"Messieurs de Coconnas and de La Mole!" said La Hurière.

"You are not dead, then?" said Coconnas.

"Why, you are both still alive?" asked the host.

"I saw you fall, all the same," said Coconnas. "I heard the sound of the bullet smashing something about you—I don't know what. I left you lying in the gutter with the blood flowing from your nose, mouth, and even from your eyes."

"All as true as gospel, Monsieur de Coconnas. But the noise that you heard was the bullet striking my helmet, against which it was flattened, fortunately; but the blow was none the less severe, as a proof of which," added La Hurière, lifting his cap, and showing a head as bald as a knee, "you see I haven't a hair left."

The two young men burst out laughing at the sight of his grotesque face.

"Ah! you are laughing!" said La Hurière, somewhat reassured; "then you haven't come with hostile intentions?"

"And you, Master La Hurière, are you cured of your warlike propensities?"

"Yes, my word, yes, gentlemen; and now . . ."

"Well? now . . ."

"Now I have taken a vow to see no other fire than that of my kitchen."

"Bravo," said Coconnas, "a very prudent resolve. Now"—added the Piedmontese—"we left two horses in your stables and two valises in your bedrooms."

"Oh! the devil!" said the host, scratching his ear

"Well?"

"Two horses, you say?"

"Yes, in the stable."

"And two valises?"

"Yes, in the bedroom."

"Look here, it's like this . . . you thought I was dead, didn't you?"

"Certainly."

"You admit that, as you made a mistake, I, for my part, could make one also."

"In thinking us to be dead also? you were quite at liberty to do so."

"Well! you see that, inasmuch as you died intestate . . ." continued La Hurière.

"What then?"

"I thought . . . I was wrong, I see it now. . . ."

"What did you think, come?"

"I thought I might be your heir."

"Oh! indeed!" said the two young men.

"I am none the less delighted that you are alive, gentlemen."

"So that you have sold our horses, I suppose?" said Coconnas.

"Alas! yes."

"And our valises?" continued La Mole.

"Oh! the valises! no . . ." cried La Hurière; "merely their contents."

"I say, La Mole," replied Coconnas, "here is an impudent rascal. Shall we rip him up?"

This threat appeared to produce a great effect on La Hurière, who ventured to say:

"But, gentlemen, the matter can be arranged, it seems to me."

"Listen," said La Mole; "it is I who have the chief ground of complaint against you."

"Certainly, Monsieur le Comte, for I remember that in a moment of folly I had the audacity to threaten you."

"Yes, with a bullet that passed two inches above my head."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"If you are sure of it, Monsieur de La Mole," said La Hurière, picking up his saucepan with an air of innocence, "I am too much your servant to contradict you."

"Well," said La Mole, "for my own part, I make no claim against you."

"What, sir!"

"Unless it be . . ."

"Yes, yes . . ." said La Hurière.

"Unless it be a dinner for myself and my friends whenever I find myself in your neighbourhood."

"What!" cried La Hurière, with delight; "I am at your orders, my gentleman."

"That is agreed upon, then?"

"With all my heart. . . . And you, Monsieur de Coconnas," continued the host, "do you subscribe to the bargain?"

"Yes; but, like my friend, I add a small condition."

"What is it?"

"That you pay M. de La Mole the fifty crowns I owe him, and which I entrusted to you."

"To me, sir? when?"

"A quarter of an hour before you sold my horse and valise."

La Hurière gave a sign of intelligence.

"Ah! I understand," said he.

And stepping towards a cupboard, he drew out, one by one, fifty crowns, which he brought to La Mole.

"Good, sir, good!" said the gentleman: "serve us up an omelette. The fifty crowns shall be for Grégoire."

"Oh!" cried La Hurière, "truly, my gentlemen, you have princely hearts, and you can rely on me in life and in death."

"In that case," said Coconnas, "bring us the omelette, and don't spare the lard and butter."

Then, turning to the clock:

"Upon my word, La Mole, you are right. We have still three hours to wait; as well spend them here as elsewhere. All the more, since, if I mistake not, we are here nearly half-way to the Pont Saint-Michel."

And the two young men went and took the same places at table, in the same little lower room, which they had occupied on that celebrated evening of the twenty-sixth of August, 1572, during which Coconnas had proposed to La Mole to play one another for the first mistress they might obtain.

Let us declare, for the credit of their morality, that it did not enter the head of either of them that evening to make a similar proposal to his companion.

CHAPTER XIX

MASTER RENÉ, PERFUMER TO THE QUEEN-MOTHER

AT the period when this story takes place, if you wanted to cross from one side of Paris to the other, there were but five bridges, some of stone, the rest of wood; these five bridges were all within the Cité proper, and were called respectively the Pont des Meuniers, Pont-au-Change, Pont Notre-Dame, Petit-Pont, and Pont Saint-Michel.

At all other places where it was necessary to cross the river, there were ferry-boats established which formed a more or less efficient substitute for bridges.

These five bridges were lined with houses, as to this day is the case with the Ponte-Vecchio, at Florence.

Of these five bridges, each of which has its own history, we are for the moment specially concerned with the Pont Saint-Michel.

This bridge had been built of stone in 1373; in spite of its apparent solidity, a flood had partly destroyed it on the 31st of January, 1408; in 1416 it was reconstructed of wood, but during the night of the 16th of December, 1547, it was again carried away; in 1550, that is to say, twenty-two years before the date at which we have arrived, it was once more rebuilt of wood, and, although already much in need of repair, was considered to be fairly substantial.

Among the houses which lined the bridge, opposite the little island where the Templars had been burned, and where to-day stands the platform of the Pont-Neuf, you noticed a timber-built house over which descended a broad roof, like the lid of an immense eye. At the single window in the first floor, above a window and a door on the ground floor, which were closely shuttered and barred, shone a dull red light, which drew the eyes of passers-by to the low, broad front of the house, which was painted blue, with rich gilt mouldings. A kind of frieze, separating the lower storey from the first floor, represented a crowd of demons rivalling one another in the grotesqueness of their attitudes, and a broad band, painted blue, like the rest of the front, extended between the frieze and the first-floor window, with this inscription: "René, Florentine, Perfumer to Her Majesty the Queen-Mother."

The door of this shop, as we have said, was securely bolted, but it was protected from nocturnal attacks, even better than by its bolts, by the reputation of its tenant, a reputation so formidable that those who came over the bridge almost always at this point crossed over to the houses on the other side, as though they feared lest the odour of the perfumes might percolate to them through the wall.

More than this, the neighbours to right and left, fearing doubtless to be compromised by his proximity, had both packed off from their houses since Master René had come to settle on the bridge, and the houses on each side of him had remained shut up and untenanted. In

spite, however, of the fact that they were empty and deserted, some belated passers-by had seen rays of light shining through their closed shutters, and affirmed that they had heard sounds resembling groans, which proved that these two houses were frequented by beings of some kind or other, though whether these beings belonged to this world or the other, was not known.

The result was that the tenants of the houses on either side of the two deserted ones occasionally asked themselves the question whether it would not be wise for them to adopt the same course which their neighbours had taken.

It was doubtless to the terror which he had publicly inspired that Master René owed the privilege of being the only person allowed to burn lights after the permitted hour. Besides, neither patrol nor night-watch had ventured to interfere with one who was doubly dear to Her Majesty in his capacity of fellow-countryman and perfumer.

As we assume that the reader, fortified by the philosophy of the eighteenth century, no longer believes either in magic or magicians, we shall invite him to enter with us this dwelling, which, at that period of credulous superstition, diffused such profound terror in its neighbourhood.

The shop on the ground floor is silent and deserted after eight in the evening, at which hour it closes, not to open again until some time next morning; it is there that the daily sale of perfumes, ointments, cosmetics, and all articles retailed by a first-class chemist, is conducted. Two apprentices assist in this retail business; they do not sleep in the house, but in the Rue de la Calandre. In the evening they leave just before closing time; in the morning they walk up and down until the shop is opened.

In this shop, which is fairly wide, and extends a good way back, are two doors, each opening upon a staircase. One of the staircases is at the side, and built inside the wall itself; the other is an exterior staircase, visible from the quay, called at the present day the Quai des Augustins, and from the part of the bank now called the Quai des Orfèvres.

Both of these staircases lead to the room on the first floor.

This room is of the same size as the shop below. A curtain, however,

stretches like a bridge across the room, dividing it into two parts. At the end of the first compartment is the door opening upon the outer staircase. In the side of the second compartment is the door from the secret staircase; this door, however, is invisible, being hidden by a carved cupboard, fastened to it by iron clamps, so that when the door opens, the cupboard moves with it. Catherine alone shares with René the secret of this door, and goes up and comes down by it; it is by putting her eye or her ear to this cupboard, in which holes have been contrived, that she sees and hears what goes on in the room.

There are also two other doors free from any concealment in the sides of this second compartment. The one opens into a little room lighted from the roof, and its only furniture is a large stove, together with some retorts, alembics, and crucibles; this is the alchemist's laboratory. The other opens upon a little cell more curious than the rest of the apartment, for it is not lighted at all, has neither carpet nor furniture, but merely a kind of stone altar.

Its floor is of flag-stones sloping from the centre to the edges, and round these edges at the bottom of the walls runs a little gutter communicating with a funnel, through the mouth of which can be seen flowing the dark water of the Seine. From nails fastened in the wall are hung strangely-shaped instruments, all either pointed or with a sharp edge—the points as sharp as a needle, the edges as sharp as a razor; some shine like mirrors, the others, on the contrary, are of a dull grey or a dark blue colour.

In a corner, two black hens tied together by the feet are struggling: this is the sanctuary of the augur.

Let us come back to the middle room, the one with the two compartments.

It is to this room that ordinary consultants are admitted; it contains Egyptian ibises, mummies with gilded fillets, a gaping crocodile, skulls with shaking teeth, musty folios gnawed by rats, affording to the eye of the visitor a miscellaneous medley producing various emotions which deflect the thoughts from their natural current. Behind the curtain are phials, strange looking boxes, jars of sinister aspect; the whole illuminated by two small silver lamps exactly alike, looking as though they had been stolen from

some altar of Santa-Maria-Novella or from the Church of the Dei-Servi at Florence, and which, burning with perfumed oil, throw their yellow light from the dark ceiling, from which each hangs by three black chains.

René, alone and with arms crossed, is striding up and down the second compartment of the middle room, shaking his head. After long and gloomy meditation he stopped in front of an hour-glass.

"Ah!" said he, "I forgot to turn it, and all the sand has probably run out long ago."

Then, looking at the moon, which was struggling to emerge from behind a dark cloud which seemed to rest on the summit of the steeple of Notre-Dame:

"Nine o'clock," said he. "If she comes, she will come as usual in an hour or an hour-and-a-half; there will even then be time for all."

At this moment a noise was heard on the bridge. René applied his ear to the mouth of a long tube, the other end of which projected into the street in the shape of a snake's head.

"No," said he, "it is neither *she* nor *they*. Those are the steps of men; they are stopping before my door; they are coming here."

At the same moment three sharp knocks resounded.

"Who is there?" asked Master René.

"Must we give our names?" asked a voice.

"It is absolutely necessary," replied René.

"In that case, my name is Comte Hannibal de Coconnas," said the voice that had already spoken.

"And mine, the Comte Lerac de La Mole," said another voice, making itself heard for the first time.

"Wait, wait, gentlemen, I am at your service."

And at the same time René drew back the bolts, raised the bars, and opened the door to the young men, contenting himself with merely turning the key after they had passed through; then, conducting them by way of the outer staircase, he introduced them into the second compartment.

La Mole, on entering it, crossed himself beneath his cloak; he was pale and unable to control the shaking of his hands.

Coconnas examined the different

contents of the room one after another, and finding himself, in the middle of his inspection, at the door of the cell, he wanted to open it.

"Excuse me, sir," said René in his grave voice, and laying his hand on that of Coconnas, "the visitors who do me the honour of coming here are only admitted to this part of the room."

"Ah! no matter," replied Coconnas; "and besides, I feel as if I want to sit down."

And he sat down in a chair.

A profound silence ensued; René waited until one or other of them should explain the object of their visit. The silence was only broken by the laboured breathing of Coconnas, who was not yet quite convalescent.

"Master René," said he at last, "you are a clever man; tell me therefore if I shall continue to feel the effects of my wound, that is to say if I shall always suffer from this shortness of breath which prevents me from riding, fencing, and eating fried omelettes."

René put his ear to Coconnas's chest, and listened attentively to the play of his lungs.

"No, Monsieur le Comte," said he, "you will get over it."

"Really and truly?"

"I guarantee it."

"You delight me."

Another silence followed.

"Don't you want to learn anything else, Monsieur le Comte?"

"Yes," said Coconnas; "I want to know if I am really in love."

"You are," said René.

"How do you know?"

"The fact of your asking the question proves it."

"Sdeath! I believe you are right. But with whom?"

"With the lady who now on all occasions employs the oath you have just uttered."

"Upon my word, Master René, you are a clever fellow," said Coconnas, in astonishment. "Now, La Mole, it is your turn."

La Mole blushed, and remained embarrassed.

"Eh! what the deuce? . . . speak up," said Coconnas.

"Go on," said the Florentine.

"I don't wish to ask you if I am in love, Monsieur René," stammered La

Mole, whose voice was gradually gaining confidence, "for I know that I am, and do not conceal it from myself; but tell me if I shall be loved in return, for in truth everything that at first gave me ground for hope seems now to point in the opposite direction."

"Perhaps you have not done all that you should do."

"What can I do, sir, but prove by my respect and devotion to the lady of my heart that she is truly and deeply beloved?"

"You are aware," said René, "that these proofs are sometimes very insignificant."

"Must I despair, then?"

"No, you must have recourse to science. There are in human nature antipathies that may be overcome, sympathies that may be forced. The iron is not the magnet, but if you magnetise it, it in its turn attracts iron."

"No doubt, no doubt," murmured La Mole, "but I dislike all this dabbling in magic."

"Ah! if you dislike it," said René, "you ought not to have come."

"Come, come," said Coconnas, "are you going to play the child now? Monsieur René, can you conjure up the devil?"

"No, Monsieur le Comte."

"I am sorry for that; I had a word or two to say to him, and that, perhaps, would have encouraged La Mole."

"Very well, be it so," said La Mole; "let us tackle the question frankly. I have heard of forms modelled in wax to resemble the beloved object. Is that a means?"

"An infallible one."

"And there is nothing in this experiment which can cause injury to the life or health of the person whom one loves?"

"Nothing."

"Let us try it, then."

"Would you like me to begin?" said Coconnas.

"No," said La Mole, "and since I have embarked upon it, I will go through with the matter to the end."

"Do you desire intensely and ardently to know how to set about it, Monsieur de La Mole?" asked the Florentine.

"Oh;" cried La Mole, "I am dying to know, Master René."

At that same moment there was a gentle knocking at the street door, so gentle

that René alone heard the sound, doubtless because he was expecting it.

Without affecting to do so, and putting in the meanwhile some trifling questions to La Mole, he put his ear to the tube and heard the sound of some voices, which appeared to determine him.

"Sum up, then, your desire now," said he, "and call the person whom you love."

La Mole knelt as though he had been speaking to a goddess, and René, passing into the first compartment, slipped noiselessly down the outside staircase; a moment later light steps were heard on the floor of the shop.

La Mole, on rising, saw Master René in front of him; the Florentine held in his hand a little figure of wax of rather slumsy workmanship; it wore a crown and a robe.

"Do you still desire to be loved by your Royal mistress?" asked the perfumer.

"Yes, if it costs me my life, if I lose my soul," answered La Mole.

"Very well," said the Florentine, taking with the tips of his fingers some drops of water from a ewer and shaking them over the head of the figure, as he uttered some words in Latin.

La Mole shuddered; he realised that some act of sacrilege was being performed.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I am baptising this little figure by the name of Marguerite."

"But with what object?"

"To establish sympathy."

La Mole was opening his lips to prevent him from proceeding further, but a mocking glance from Coconnas checked his words.

René, who had seen the movement, waited.

"You must surrender your will fully and entirely," said he.

"Go on," answered La Mole.

René traced some cabalistic characters on a roll of red paper, placed them on a steel needle, and with this needle pierced the little statue to the heart.

At the mouth of the wound, strange to say, a small drop of blood appeared; he then set fire to the paper.

The heat of the needle melted the wax around it, and dried up the drop of blood.

"In the same way," said René, "by the force of sympathy, your love will

pierce and burn the heart of her whom you love."

Coconnas, in his capacity as a free-thinker, laughed in his sleeve and jeered under his breath; but La Mole, who was in love, and also superstitious, felt a cold sweat form at the roots of his hair.

"And now," said René, "place your lips on those of the statue, and say:

"Marguerite, I love you; come!"

La Mole obeyed.

At the same moment the door of the second apartment opened and light steps were heard approaching. Coconnas, who was inquisitive and incredulous, drew his dagger, and fearing that, if he lifted the curtain, René would stop him as he had done when he tried to open the door of the cell, he cut a hole in the thick hangings with his dagger, and applying his eye to the opening, uttered a cry of astonishment, which was responded to by corresponding cries from two women's voices.

"What is the matter?" asked La Mole, almost dropping the wax figure, which René took out of his hands.

"The matter is," replied Coconnas, "that the Duchesse de Nevers and Madame Marguerite are there."

"Well! unbelievers!" said René, with an austere smile, "do you still doubt the force of sympathy?"

La Mole had remained petrified on seeing the Queen. Coconnas had felt dazzled for the moment on recognising Madame de Nevers. The former imagined that the enchantments of René had conjured up Marguerite's phantom; the latter, seeing the door still open by which these charming phantoms had entered, would readily have assigned to the ordinary and material world the explanation of this prodigy.

While La Mole crossed himself and sighed as if his heart would burst, Coconnas—who had had the whole interval for asking himself philosophical questions, and for driving away the Evil One by the aid of that holy-water sprinkler called incredulity—Coconnas, I say, seeing through the hole in the curtain the astonishment of Madame de Nevers and the somewhat caustic smile of Marguerite, judged that the moment was critical. So realising that one can say on behalf of a friend what one would not venture to say on one's own behalf, instead of approaching Madame de Nevers,

he went straight to Marguerite, and putting one knee to the ground, in the manner in which Artaxerxes the Great used to be represented outside the shows at fairs, he cried, in a tone to which the difficulty of breathing caused by his wound did not fail to impart a certain appealing force:

"Madame, at this very moment, at the request of my friend the Comte de La Mole, Master René was calling up your spirit; well, to my great astonishment, your spirit has appeared accompanied by a body which is very dear to me, and which I commend to my friend. Shade of her Majesty the Queen of Navarre, will you be good enough to ask the body of your companion to pass to the other side of this curtain?"

Marguerite began to laugh, and motioned to Henriette, who passed to the other side.

"La Mole, my friend," said Coconnas, "be eloquent as Demosthenes, as Cicero, and reflect that my life depends upon your persuading the body of the Duchesse de Nevers here that I am her most devoted, obedient, and loyal servant."

"But—" stammered La Mole.

"Do as I bid you; and you, Master René, see that nobody disturbs us."

René undertook to do as Coconnas asked.

"By 'r Lord! sir," said Marguerite, "you are a man of sense. I am listening to you; what have you to say to me?"

"This, Madame, that the spirit of my friend—for it is a spirit, and the proof is that it does not utter the slightest word—the spirit of my friend implores me to make use of the faculty of speaking intelligibly possessed by bodies, in order to say to you: Fair spirit, the gentleman who has been rendered thus incorporeal has lost his whole body and breath through the severity of your eyes. Were you yourself in bodily shape, I would ask Master René to thrust me into some sulphurous hole, rather than I would use such language to the daughter of King Henri II., the sister of King Charles IX. and the wife of the King of Navarre. But spirits are free from all earthly pride and are not angry at being loved. Well, Madame, ask your body to bestow a little love on the soul of poor La Mole—a soul in torment if ever there was one, a soul persecuted, in the first place, by friendship, which, on three occasions, has driven some inches of steel into his

body; a soul consumed by the flame of your eyes, a thousand times more consuming than the fires of hell. Have some pity, then, on this poor soul; bestow a little love on what was the handsome La Mole, and if you cannot speak, give a sign, a smile. My friend's is a very intelligent soul, and it will understand everything. 'Sdeath, smile, I say; or I will run my sword through the body of René, because he—by virtue of the power he possesses over spirits—is compelling yours, which he has already conjured up so seasonably, to act in a way that ill befits an honest spirit such as you appear to me to be."

At this peroration of Coconnas, who had clapped himself down in front of the Queen like Æneas descending to the infernal regions, Marguerite could not restrain a loud peal of laughter, and, still preserving the silence befitting a Royal shade on such an occasion, she extended her hand to Coconnas.

The latter took it gingerly in his own, calling out at the same time to La Mole.

"Shade of my friend," cried he, "come here this instant."

La Mole, astonished and trembling, obeyed.

"That's right," said Coconnas, taking him by the back of the head, "now put the shadow of your handsome brown face to this white and shadowy hand which you see here."

And Coconnas, uniting the gesture to his words, joined this delicate hand to La Mole's lips, and held them thus together for a moment, without the hand trying to free itself from the gentle pressure.

Marguerite had not ceased to smile, but there was no smile on the lips of Madame de Nevers, who was still trembling from the unexpected appearance of the two gentlemen. Her uneasiness was increased by a sensation of rising jealousy, for she thought that Coconnas should not have forgotten his own affairs for those of another.

La Mole observed the contraction of her brow, and the menacing flash of her eyes, and, in spite of the intoxicating emotion to which his rapture urged him to abandon himself, he realised the risk his friend was running, and guessed in what way he must endeavour to extricate him from it.

Rising, therefore, and leaving Marguerite's hand in that of Coconnas, he

went and took the hand of the Duchesse de Nevers, and, falling on one knee:

"Fairest and most adorable of women," said he,—"*I speak of living women and not of shades*"—and he looked with a smile at Marguerite—"permit a spirit disembodied from its envelope of clay to atone for the absence of a body quite absorbed by a material friendship. M. de Coconnas, you see, is but a man, a brave and well-built man, a piece of flesh pleasant to look at, perhaps, but perishable like all flesh—*Omnis caro fenum*—'all flesh is grass.' Although this gentleman utters from morning to night the most suppliant prayers touching yourself, although you have seen him distributing the hardest blows that were ever given in France, yet this champion, so bold in his eloquence when addressing a shade, dare not speak to a woman. That is the reason why he addressed himself to the shade of the Queen, charging *me* to speak to your beautiful body, to tell you that he lays at your feet his heart and his soul; that he asks your divine eyes to look on him with pity, your warm pink fingers to call him by a sign, your melodious voice to utter some of those words which one never forgets; should you refuse, he asks me one thing more, namely, in case he cannot melt you, for the second time to run my sword, which is a real blade—swords are not shadows, save in the sunlight—to run my sword, I say, through his body for the second time; since he cannot live unless you bid him live for you alone."

The animation and buffoonery which Coconnas had put into his discourse were equalled by the tenderness, the impassioned force, and the coaxing humility just displayed in the petition of La Mole.

Henriette's eyes now turned from La Mole, to whom she had listened all the time he had been speaking, and were directed towards Coconnas, to see if the expression of his face was in harmony with the amorous oration of his friend. She appeared to be satisfied with what she saw, for she blushed, her bosom heaved, and, as though confessing herself vanquished, she said to Coconnas, with a smile which disclosed a double row of pearls encased in coral:

"Is this true?"

"'Sdeath o' my life!" cried Coconnas, fascinated by this look, and glowing with a responsive flame. "It is true! . . .

Oh! yes, Madame, it is true, true upon your life, true upon my death!"

"Come, then!" said Henriette, giving him her hand, with a surrender betrayed by the languor of her eyes.

Coconnas threw his velvet cap into the air, and sprang to her side, while La Mole, summoned by a gesture from Marguerite, performed an amorous "set to partners" with his friend.

At that moment René appeared at the door.

"Silence!" he cried, in a tone which extinguished all this amorous flame . . . "Silence!"

They heard the grating of a key in the lock, and the sound of a door turning on its hinges.

"But," said Marguerite haughtily, "I imagine no one has the right to enter when we are here!"

"Not even the Queen-Mother?" whispered René.

Marguerite disappeared instantly down the outer staircase, dragging La Mole after her; Henriette and Coconnas, half entwined in each other's arms, followed in their steps, all four of them flying off, just as the graceful birds that you have seen billing on a flowering branch fly away at the first sound of alarm.

CHAPTER XX

THE TWO BLACK HENS

THE two couples had vanished just in time. Catherine was putting the key into the lock of the second door at the moment when Coconnas and Madame de Nevers made their way out below, and, as she entered, she could hear the steps of the fugitives hurrying down the stairway. She cast an inquiring glance around, and presently, fixing her suspicious eyes on René, who stood bowing before her:

"Who was there?" she asked.

"Some lovers who were satisfied with my word when I assured them that they were really in love."

"No matter for that," said Catherine, shrugging her shoulders; "is there anyone here now?"

"No one except your Majesty and myself."

"Have you done what I bade you?"

"About the black hens?"

"Yes."

"They are ready, Madame."

"Ah! if only you were a Jew!" murmured Catherine.

"A Jew; Madame; why?"

"Because then you would be able to read the precious treatises on sacrifices, written by the Hebrews. I have had one of them translated, and I see that it was neither in the heart nor the liver that the Hebrews sought for omens, as the Romans did, but rather in the arrangement of the brain, and in the shapes of the letters traced thereon by the all-powerful hand of destiny."

"Yes, Madame, I, have heard as much from an old Rabbi, a friend of mine."

"There are marks thus delineated which disclose a whole train of prophecy; only, the Chaldean wise men recommend . . ."

"Recommend . . . what?" asked René, seeing that the Queen hesitated to go on.

"That the experiment should be conducted with human brains, as being more highly developed and more sympathetic to the will of him who consults them."

"Alas! Madame," said René, "your Majesty is well aware that to do that would be impossible."

"It would be difficult, at least," said Catherine; "had we known this on St. Bartholomew's Day . . . eh! René, what a rich collection! . . . The first condemned criminal . . . I will remember that. Meanwhile, we must confine ourselves within the limits of the possible. . . . Is the sacrificial chamber prepared?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Let us go in."

René lighted a candle composed of strange substances, of which the odour, now subtle and penetrating, now nauseous and smoky, revealed the presence of several different ingredients; then, showing the light for Catherine, he preceded her into the cell.

Catherine herself selected from among the various sacrificial instruments a knife of bluish steel, while René went to fetch one of the two fowls which were rolling their eyes uneasily in a corner.

"How shall we proceed?"

"We will examine the liver of one and the brain of the other. If the two experiments yield the same results, we shall be forced to believe, especially if those results coincide with those we have obtained previously."

"Which shall we begin with?"

"With the experiment of the liver."

"Very well," said René, fastening the fowl to the altar by means of two rings, placed at the two ends in such a manner that, when turned upon its back, it could only struggle without being able to move from the spot.

Catherine severed its breast with one stroke of the knife. The fowl uttered three cries, and expired after struggling for a short while.

"Still the three cries," murmured Catherine, "three death-signals." Next she proceeded to open the body.

"And the liver hanging to the left side," she continued, "still at the left, denoting a triple death, followed by an escheat. René, it is terrible!"

"We must see, Madame, if the presages of the second victim agree with those of the first."

René untied the body of the fowl, and threw it into a corner; then he went to the other fowl, which, anticipating its fate by that of its companion, endeavoured to avoid it by rushing round the cell, and at last, finding itself penned in a corner, flew over René's head, and, in its flight, extinguished the magic candle which Catherine was holding in her hand.

"You see, René," said the Queen. "Thus will our race be extinguished. Death will blow upon it, and it will disappear from the face of the earth. Three sons, however, three sons! . . ." she murmured, sorrowfully.

René took the candle from her, and went and lighted it in the other room.

When he came back he saw the fowl, which had buried its head in the funnel.

"This time," said Catherine, "we will have no cries, for I will cut off its head at one stroke."

Catherine was as good as her word, and when the fowl had been fastened down, she severed its head at a blow. The fowl, however, in its expiring convulsion, opened its beak three times, and then lay still.

"Look!" said Catherine, in alarm, "instead of three cries, three sighs—three, ever three. All my three sons will

perish. All these victims, before yielding up their lives, count up to the number three. Now let us look at the signs in the head."

Catherine next held down the fowl's pale comb, opened the skull carefully, and separating the parts so as to leave the lobes of the brain exposed, tried to trace the shape of some letter of the alphabet in the bleeding curves marked by the division of the cerebral pulp.

"Still, still!" she cried, beating her hands together, "and this time the prognostication is clearer than ever. Come and look."

René approached.

"What letter is that?" asked Catherine, pointing to a mark.

"An H," answered René.

"How many times repeated?"

René counted.

"Four times," he said.

"Is it so, indeed? I see it; it stands for Henri IV. Oh!" she groaned as she threw away the knife, "I am accursed in my posterity."

It was a terrible sight to see the frantic woman, pale as a corpse in the gloom of the dark chamber, clenching and unclenching her bloody fingers.

"He will reign, he will reign!" said she, with a sigh of despair.

"He will reign," repeated René, plunged in deep meditation.

The gloomy expression on Catherine's features, however, was presently lightened by a brighter thought, to which her brain seemed to give birth.

"René," said she, extending her hand towards the Florentine, but keeping her head buried in her breast; "René, is there not a terrible story of a doctor of Perugia who poisoned his daughter and his daughter's lover at one stroke?"

"And that lover was . . . ?" continued Catherine, in a pensive tone.

"It was King Ladislas, Madame."

"Ah! yes, true," she murmured. "Have you any details of the story?"

"I have an old book which gives an account of it," answered René.

"Well, let us go into the other room; you shall lend it to me."

They both left the cell, René closing the door behind him.

"Has your Majesty any orders to give me in regard to fresh sacrifices?" asked the Florentine.

"No, René, no; I am sufficiently

convinced for the moment: we will wait until we can procure the head of some condemned criminal, and on the day of execution you shall arrange matters with the executioner."

René bowed in token of assent, then, candle in hand, approached the shelves on which his books were ranged, mounted a chair, and, taking down a book, handed it to the Queen, who opened it.

"What is this?" she asked—"Of the method of rearing and feeding tiercels, falcons, and gerfalcons, so as to render them courageous and always ready for flight."

"Ah! pardon me, Madame, I have made a mistake. That is a treatise on venery, written by a learned scholar of Lucca, for the famous Castruccio Castracani. It was side by side with the other, and in a similar binding. The book is a very rare one, I may tell you; there are but three copies in the world: one in the Library at Venice, a second which was purchased by your grandfather Lorenzo, and offered by Pietro de' Medici to King Charles VIII. at the time of his visit to Florence, and this is the third."

"I respect it," said Catherine, "for its rareness, but, having no need of it, I give it back to you."

And with her left hand she returned it to René, holding out her right hand for the book which she wanted.

This time René made no mistake, and found the right volume. He got down from the chair, turned over the leaves for a moment, and handed it to her open.

Catherine seated herself at a table. René placed the magic candle beside her, and by the light of its pale blue flame she read a few lines in an undertone.

"Good," she said, closing the book; "that is all I wanted to know."

She got up, leaving the book on the table, but carrying away with her in the depths of her mind the thought which had germinated there, and would ripen in due time.

René waited respectfully, candle in hand, until the Queen, who appeared about to depart, should give him fresh orders or address further questions to him. Catherine took a few steps in silence, with her head bowed and her finger on her mouth.

Then, suddenly stopping before René, and raising to him her eyes, round and fixed as those of a bird of prey:

"Confess that you have made some philtre for her," she said.

"For whom?" asked René, with a start.

"For Madame de Sauve."

"I, Madame," said René; "never!"

"Never?"

"On my soul I swear it."

"There is some magic in it, however, for he is madly in love, he who is not renowned for his constancy."

"Who is *he*, Madame?"

"He! that accursed Henri, he who will succeed our three sons, who will one day be styled Henri IV., for all he is the son of Jeanne d'Albret."

Catherine accompanied these words with a sigh that made René shudder, for he recalled to mind the famous gloves which, by Catherine's order, he had prepared for the Queen of Navarre.

"He continues to visit her, then?" asked René.

"Perpetually," said Catherine.

"I thought, however, that the King of Navarre had now become entirely devoted to his wife."

"All acting, René, mere acting. With what object I know not, but they are all in league to deceive me. My daughter Marguerite herself has declared against me; perhaps she, too, hopes for the death of her brothers, hopes to be Queen of France."

"Yes, perhaps," said René, relapsing into meditation, and echoing Catherine's terrible suspicion.

"However, we shall see," said Catherine, advancing towards the door leading to the ground-floor, thinking it unnecessary, doubtless, to descend by the secret staircase, since she knew that she and René were alone.

René preceded her, and both presently found themselves in the perfumer's shop. "You promised me some new cosmetics for my hands and lips, René," said she; "winter is close at hand, and my skin, as you know, is very sensitive to cold."

"I have already prepared them, Madame, and will bring them to you to-morrow."

"You will not find me to-morrow evening before nine or ten o'clock. During the day I shall be at my devotions."

"Very well, Madame; I will be at the Louvre at nine."

"Madame de Sauve has beautiful hands and lips," said Catherine, in a

careless tone; "what paste does she use?"

"For her hands?"

"Yes, for her hands in the first place."

"Heliotrope paste."

"And for her lips?"

"For her lips she is going to use a new preparation which I have invented, a box of which I was intending to bring to your Majesty at the same time as I brought Madame de Sauve's."

Catherine remained for a moment in thought.

"She is a beautiful creature, certainly," she said, still in response to her secret thoughts, "and there is nothing surprising in the Prince of Béarn's passion for her."

"And she is especially devoted to your Majesty—so I believe at least," said René.

Catherine smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"When a woman is in love," she said, "is she ever devoted to anyone but her lover? You have made her some philtre or other, René."

"I swear to you, Madame, I have not."

"Very well, no more of it. Show me the preparation of which you were speaking, which gives freshness and rosiness to the lips."

René went to a shelf and showed Catherine six small round silver boxes ranged side by side.

"That is the only philtre for which she has asked me," said René; "it is true, as your Majesty says, that I have composed it expressly for Madame de Sauve, as her lips are so delicate and tender that they are chapped by sun and wind alike."

Catherine opened one of the boxes, which contained a most delicious carmine paste.

"René," said she, "give me some of the paste for my hands; I will take it with me."

René disappeared with the candle to fetch from a special compartment what the Queen desired. He did not, however, return so quickly but that he fancied he saw that Catherine, with a hasty movement, had just seized one of the boxes and concealed it beneath her mantle. He was too familiar with the surreptitious acts of the Queen-Mother to be so clumsy as to appear to have noticed it. So, placing the required paste in a bag of paper ornamented with fleurs-de-lis:

"Here it is, Madame," said he.

"Thank you, René," replied Catherine.

Then, after a moment's silence: "Do not take this stuff to Madame de Sauve for a week or so; I should like to be the first to try it."

She prepared to depart.

"Shall I escort your Majesty home?" said René.

"Only to the end of the bridge," answered Catherine; "my gentlemen are waiting for me there with my litter."

They both went out and reached the corner of the Rue de la Barillerie, where four gentlemen on horseback and a litter without armorial bearings awaited Catherine.

On returning to his house, René's first care was to count his bottles of opiate. One of them was missing.

CHAPTER XXI

IN MADAME DE SAUVE'S APARTMENTS

CATHERINE was not mistaken in her suspicions. Henri had resumed his former habits and repaired every evening to visit Madame de Sauve. At first he had conducted these visits with the greatest secrecy, then his distrust had gradually diminished and he had neglected to take precautions, so much so that Catherine had no trouble in assuring herself that the Queen of Navarre continued to be, in name Marguerite, in fact Madame de Sauve.

We mentioned Madame de Sauve's apartment at the beginning of this story; but the door opened by Dariole to the King of Navarre has always closed tight behind him, so that this apartment, the scene of the mysterious amours of the Prince de Béarn, is quite unknown to us.

This lodging, of the nature of those supplied by princes to their retainers in the palaces which they inhabit, in order that they may be at their beck and call, was certainly smaller and less comfortable than any lodging in the city of Paris would have been. It was situated, as we already know, on the second floor almost directly over that of Henri, and the door opened on a corridor, the extremity of which was lighted by a pointed Gothic window with small leaded panes, which, even on the brightest days, admitted but

a feeble light. On winter afternoons it became necessary to illuminate this corridor by a lamp which, containing only the same quantity of oil in winter as in summer, went out at about ten in the evening, thus affording, since the winter days had now arrived, the greatest possible security to the two lovers.

A small ante-chamber, hung with silk damask adorned with large yellow flowers, a reception-room hung with blue velvet, a sleeping-chamber, of which the bed, with its twisted pillars and curtains of cherry-coloured satin, was placed in an alcove adorned with a silver mirror and two pictures representing the loves of Venus and Adonis; such was the lodging—the nest we should say to-day—of the charming lady of the bedchamber to Queen Catherine de' Medici.

Opposite a dressing-table furnished with all its proper accessories, you might, after careful search, have discovered a small door opening upon a kind of Oratory, in which stood a *prie-Dieu* raised upon two steps. On the walls of this Oratory were hung, as though to serve as a corrective to the two mythological pictures above alluded to, three or four paintings of a religious character. Between these paintings were suspended from gilt nails some feminine weapons of offence; for at this period of mysterious intrigues, women as well as men carried weapons, and sometimes employed them with equal effect.

On the evening of the day succeeding the one on which the incidents mentioned in the last chapter occurred at the house of René, Madame de Sauve, seated in her bedroom on a couch, was relating to Henri both her fears and her love for him, instancing in proof of both the devotion which she had shown on the famous night succeeding that of St. Bartholomew, that night which Henri, as will be recollected, had spent in his wife's apartments.

Henri, on his side, was expressing his gratitude to her. Madame de Sauve was looking charming in her simple muslin dressing-gown, and Henri was very appreciative.

Presently, Henri, who was really in love, grew thoughtful; while Madame de Sauve also, who had ended by loving with all her heart the man to whom Catherine had ordered her merely to pretend love, gazed attentively at Henri

to see if his looks accorded with his words.

"Come, Henri, be frank," Madame de Sauve was saying, "during that night which you spent in the Queen's closet with M. de La Mole lying at your feet, did you not regret that that worthy gentleman was between yourself and the Queen's bedchamber?"

"I did, indeed, my sweet, for I should have had to pass through that room in order to reach the one in which I am so happy at this present moment."

Madame de Sauve smiled.

"And you have not been there since?"

"Except at the times that I have told you."

"You will never go there without telling me?"

"Never."

"Would you swear that?"

"Yes, certainly, were I still a Huguenot, but . . ."

"But what?"

"The Catholic Religion, the doctrines of which I am just learning, has taught me that we should never swear."

"Oh! you Gascon!" said Madame de Sauve, shaking her head.

"But if I were to question you, Charlotte, in your turn, would you answer my questions?"

"Of course, I would," replied the young woman. "I have nothing to conceal from you."

"Then tell me, Charlotte, how it is that, after resisting me so determinedly before my marriage, you have now become less cruel to me, who am à clumsy Béarnais, a ridiculous provincial, a prince too poor, in short, to keep the jewels of his crown bright."

"Henri," said Charlotte, "you ask me to solve the enigma which the philosophers of all countries for three thousand years have tried to solve. Never ask a woman *why* she loves you, but be satisfied with asking her *if* she loves you."

"Do you love me, Charlotte?" asked Henri.

"I do," replied Madame de Sauve with a charming smile, and letting her beautiful hand slip into that of her lover.

Henri retained her hand.

"But," replied he, pursuing his thoughts, "suppose I guessed the key to this enigma, for which the philosophers have sought in vain for three thousand

years—guessed it at least with regard to yourself, Charlotte.”

Madame de Sauve blushed.

“You love me,” continued Henri, “and therefore I need ask you nothing else, and I think myself the happiest of mortals. Adam did not find himself perfectly happy in the Garden of Eden, and he ate the wretched apple which has implanted in us all that instinct of curiosity which makes everyone spend his life in the search for the unknown. Tell me, my love, that you may aid me in my search, was it not Queen Catherine who, in the first place, bade you to love me?”

“Henri,” said Madame de Sauve, “speak low when you mention the Queen-Mother.”

“Oh!” said Henri, with a freedom and confidence which deceived even Madame de Sauve herself, “there was good reason to suspect her formerly, when we were on bad terms with one another; but now that I am her daughter’s husband . . .”

“The husband of Madame Marguerite!” said Charlotte, reddening with jealousy.

“It is your turn to speak low,” said Henri. “Now that I am her daughter’s husband, we are the best friends in the world. What did they want? That I should turn Catholic, as it appears. Well! grace has touched my heart, and by the intercession of St. Bartholomew I have become a Catholic. We now live together as a happy family and like good Christians.”

“And Queen Marguerite?”

“She,” said Henri, “is the bond that unites us all.”

“But you told me, Henri, that the Queen of Navarre, in return for my devotion to her, had acted generously towards me. If you spoke truly, if this generosity, for which I have vowed such gratitude to her, is real, it is merely a conventional bond that can be easily broken. You cannot then rely on this support, for you have not deceived anybody by this pretended intimacy.”

“I do rely on it, however, and it is the pillow on which I have reposed for the last three months.”

“Then you have deceived me, Henri,” cried Madame de Sauve, “and Madame Marguerite is your wife in the full sense of the word.”

Henri smiled.

“Stop, Henri!” said Madame de

Sauve, “there is one of those smiles that exasperate me and make me long, King though you are, to tear out your eyes.”

“In that case,” said Henri, “I must deny this pretended intimacy, since there are moments when, King though I am, you would like to tear my eyes out because you believe the intimacy exists.”

“Henri! Henri!” said Madame de Sauve, “I believe that not even God himself knows your thoughts.”

“I fancy, my sweet,” said Henri, “that Catherine told you at first to love me, then that your heart bade you do so, and that, when these two voices speak to you, you hear only that of your heart. Now, I also love you, and that with all my soul, but for that very reason, if I had any secrets, I should not confide them to you, through fear of compromising you, of course . . . for the Queen’s friendship is changeable, it is a mother-in-law’s friendship.”

Charlotte had not reckoned upon this; it seemed to her that the veil, which spread thickly between herself and her lover whenever she tried to sound the depths of his fathomless heart, was assuming the consistency of a wall, and separating them from one another. At this reply of her lover’s, the tears started to her eyes, and as at this moment the clock struck ten:

“Sire,” she said, “this is my hour for bed; my duties summon me to the Queen-Mother very early to-morrow morning.”

“Then you banish me this evening, my love?” said Henri.

“Henri, I am sad, and therefore you would find me dull company, and would no longer love me; you see, it is much better that you should go.”

“Be it so,” said Henri, “I will withdraw if you insist upon it, Charlotte; only, *pardieu!* you must grant me the privilege of assisting at your toilet.”

“But will you not be keeping Queen Marguerite waiting, sire?”

“Charlotte,” replied Henri, gravely, “it was arranged between us that we would never speak of the Queen of Navarre, and this evening we seem to have talked of nothing else.”

Madame de Sauve sighed as she sat down at her dressing-table. Henri took a chair, drew it close to the one on which his mistress was sitting, and crossing his knees and leaning back:

“Come, my good little Charlotte,” said

he, "let me see you make yourself beautiful, and beautiful for me, whatever you may say. Zounds! what a host of things, what jars of perfume, what bags of powder, what phials and perfuming pans!"

"They seem a great many," sighed Charlotte, "and yet they are too few, since in spite of them all I have not yet discovered how to reign alone in your Majesty's heart."

"Come," said Henri, "don't let us relapse into argument. What is that fine, delicate little pencil for? is it not for painting the eyebrows of my Olympian goddess?"

"Yes, sire," answered Madame de Sauve, with a smile, "you are right at the first guess."

"And this pretty little ivory rake?"

"That is for tracing the line of the hair."

"And this charming little silver box with the embossed lid?"

"Oh! that, Sire, is sent by René; it is the famous salve that he promised me ever so long ago for making those lips which your Majesty is good enough to think fairly soft, even softer still."

Henri, as though in token of approval of what had just been said by this charming woman, whose brow cleared as the conversation gave her the opportunity of displaying her coquetry, placed his lips on those which the Baronne was regarding attentively in the mirror.

Charlotte reached out her hand to the box which had just formed the subject of the above explanation, with the intention, doubtless, of showing Henri how she employed the rosy paste, when a sharp knock at the door of the ante-chamber made the two lovers start.

"Some one is knocking, Madame," said Dariole, putting her head between the curtains.

"Go and see who knocks, and come back," said Madame de Sauve. Henri and Charlotte looked at one another uneasily, and Henri was thinking of retiring to the oratory in which he had already more than once found refuge, when Dariole appeared again.

"Madame," said she, "it is Master René, the perfumer."

At mention of this name Henri frowned, and involuntarily compressed his lips.

"Would you like me to refuse him admission?" said Charlotte.

"No," said Henri, "René does nothing without having well considered it beforehand. If he comes to see you it is because he has good reasons for so doing."

"Do you want to conceal yourself, then?"

"I shall take good care not to do so," said Henri, "for René knows everything, and he knows that I am here."

"But has not you Majesty some reason which makes his presence painful to you?"

"I?" said Henri, with an effort which, spite of his power of self-control, he could not entirely conceal, "I? none? There was a coolness between us, it is true, but, since the eve of St. Bartholomew, we have made it up again."

"Admit him," said Madame de Sauve, to Dariole.

A moment later René appeared, and threw a comprehensive glance round the chamber.

Madame de Sauve was still at her dressing-table.

Henri had resumed his place on the couch.

Charlotte was in the light, while Henri was in the shadow.

"Madame," said René, with respectful familiarity, "I have come to make my apologies."

"For what, René?" asked Madame de Sauve, with the air of condescension always employed by pretty women to that crowd of purveyors by whom they are surrounded, and who aid in making them more beautiful.

"Because I promised so long ago to do something for those pretty lips, and because . . ."

"You have not kept your promise until to-day, is that it?" said Charlotte.

"Until to-day!" repeated René.

"Yes, it is only this very evening that I received this box which you sent me."

"Ah! I guessed it," murmured René, looking with a strange expression at the little box on Madame Suave's table, which exactly resembled those in his shop,—“and have you used it?"

"No, not yet; I was going to try it just as you came in."

René's face assumed a thoughtful expression, which was not lost upon Henri, whose notice, for that matter, very few things escaped.

"Well, René, what is the matter?" asked the King.

"The matter, Sire! nothing," said the

perfumer, "I am waiting humbly till your Majesty addresses me before I take leave of the Baronne."

"Come, come," said Henri, with a smile, "is it necessary for me to tell you that I am pleased to see you?"

René glanced round him, made a tour of the chamber, as though with eyes and ears to sound the doors and the hangings; then, pausing and placing himself so as embrace both Madame de Sauve and Henri in the same glance:

"I do not think you are," said he.

Henri realised, thanks to that wonderful instinct, which, like a sixth sense, guided him during all the early part of his life amid the dangers that surrounded him, that some strange emotion in the nature of a struggle was passing in the mind of the perfumer, and turned towards him, the King still remaining in shadow, while the light fell upon the Florentine.

"You here at this late hour, René?" said he.

"Am I so unfortunate as to annoy your Majesty by my presence?" replied the perfumer, taking a step backwards.

"No; only I want to know one thing."

"What is that, Sire?"

"Did you expect to find me here?"

"I was sure of it."

"You were looking for me, then?"

"At any rate, I am glad to find you."

"You have something to say to me?" continued Henri.

"Perhaps, Sire," answered René.

Charlotte blushed, for she trembled lest the communication which the perfumer appeared anxious to make should refer to her past conduct towards Henri: accordingly she pretended that, having been absorbed in the details of her toilet, she had heard nothing, and, interrupting the conversation:

"Ah! René," she exclaimed, as she opened the box of salve, "you are really a charming man; this paste has a wonderful colour, and as you are here, I shall honour you by experimenting on the new production in your presence."

And taking the box in one hand, she dipped a finger of the other in the pink paste, preparatory to putting it on her lips.

René gave a start.

The Baronne smilingly lifted the paste to her mouth.

Henri, still in the shadow, but with his eyes eagerly fixed on his companions,

lost nothing either of Madame de Sauve's movement or of René's shudder.

Charlotte's finger was close to her lips when René grasped her arm, just as Henri sprang up for the same purpose. The King sank back noiselessly upon the couch.

"One moment, Madame," said René, with a forced smile; "you must not use that paste without special directions."

"And who will give me those directions?"

"I will."

"When?"

"As soon as I have finished what I have to say to his Majesty the King of Navarre."

Charlotte opened her eyes in astonishment, understanding nothing of this mysterious language, and remained with the box in her hand, looking at the tip of her finger, reddened by the pink paste.

Henri rose, and moved by an idea which, like all the young King's ideas, had two aspects—one which appeared on the surface and the other which lay buried beneath it—took Charlotte's hand and made a movement to press it, all red as it was, to his lips.

"One moment," said René, eagerly; "be good enough, Madame, to wash those fair hands with this Neapolitan soap, which I forgot to send you with the paste, and which I have had the honour to bring to you myself."

And drawing from its silver covering a cake of soap of a greenish colour, he placed it in a basin, poured some water into it, and presented it on one knee to Madame de Sauve.

"Why, really, Master René, I hardly recognise you," said Henri; "your gallantry leaves all the Court fops far in the lurch."

"Oh! what a delicious scent!" cried Madame de Sauve, rubbing her beautiful hands in the lather produced by the perfumed tablet.

René carried out his duties to the full, and presented a towel of fine Dutch linen to Madame de Sauve, who wiped her hands with it.

"Now," said the Florentine to Henri, "do as you please, Monseigneur."

Charlotte presented her hand to Henri, who kissed it, and while Charlotte turned half round in her chair to hear what René was going to say, the King of Navarre resumed his place, more convinced than

ever that something extraordinary was passing through the mind of the perfumer.

"Well?" asked Charlotte.

The Florentine appeared to summon up all his resolution, and turned towards Henri.

CHAPTER XXII

"SIRE, YOU WILL BE KING."

"SIRE," said René to Henri, "I am going to speak to you of a matter which has been occupying my mind for some time past."

"About perfumes?" said Henri, with a smile.

"Well, Sire, yes . . . about perfumes," answered René, with a curious gesture of acquiescence.

"Speak, I am listening to you, and it is a subject which has at all times interested me greatly."

René looked at Henri, in order to try and read the thoughts which lay concealed behind his words; but, finding the attempt entirely futile, he continued:

"A friend of mine, Sire, has arrived from Florence who is much devoted to astrology."

"Yes," interrupted Henri, "I know that the Florentines have a passion for the pursuit."

"He has, in conjunction with the first professors of the art, drawn the horoscopes of the chief personages of Europe."

"Ah! indeed," said Henri.

"And as the House of Bourbon stands at the head of these illustrious families, descending as it does from the Comte de Clermont, fifth son of St. Louis, your Majesty may suppose that your horoscope has not been overlooked."

Henri listened with increased attention.

"And you remember this horoscope?" said the King, with a smile, which he endeavoured to render one of indifference.

"Oh!" replied René, with a shake of the head, "your horoscope is not of the class that is easily forgotten."

"Really?" said Henri, with an ironical gesture.

"Yes, Sire, your Majesty, according to the terms of this horoscope, is called to the most brilliant of destinies."

The eyes of the young Prince flashed involuntarily, but the next moment they displayed an expression of indifference.

"All Italian oracles are flattering," said Henri; "well, they who flatter, lie. Were there not some which predicted that I should command armies?"

And he burst into a peal of laughter; but an observer less taken up with his own thoughts than René was, would have observed how forced this laughter was.

"Sire," said René, coldly, "the horoscope announces better things than that."

"Does it predict that I shall win battles at the head of these armies?"

"Better even than that, sire."

"Come," said Henri, "you will see that I shall be a conqueror."

"Sire, you shall be *King*."

"Eh! by the Lord!" said Henri, stifling the violent beating of his heart, "but am I not a King already?"

"Sire, my friend knows what he is promising; not only will you be King, but you will reign."

"In that case," said Henri, in the same tone of irony, "your friend will expect ten gold crowns, will he not, René; for a prediction of that sort is a very ambitious one, especially as things go at the present time? Come, René, as I am not rich, I will give your friend five of them on the spot, and the other five when the prediction is fulfilled."

"Sire," said Madame de Sauve, "don't forget that you are already pledged to Dariole, and don't overload yourself with promises."

"Madame," said Henri, "I hope that for the future I shall be treated as a King, and that everybody will be well satisfied if I keep the half of my promises."

"Sire," resumed René, "I will continue."

"Oh! is there more?" said Henri. "very well, if I am to be Emperor, I will give double."

"My friend, sire, has come from Florence with this horoscope, which he repeated in Paris always with the same result, and he confided a secret to me."

"A secret which interests his Majesty?" asked Charlotte, eagerly.

"I believe so," said the Florentine.

"He is trying to find words," thought Henri, without attempting to help him out; "the affair is a difficult one to speak about, apparently."

"Come, speak, what is it about?" resumed Madame de Sauve.

"It concerns," said the Florentine, weighing each of his words, "it concerns all these rumours of poisoning which have been going about the Court for some time."

A slight dilation of the King's nostrils was the only indication of his increased attention at this sudden turn taken by the conversation.

"And your Florentine friend," said Henri, "possesses some information on the subject of these poisonings?"

"Yes, sire."

"How can you entrust to me a secret which is not your own, René, especially a secret of such importance?" said Henri, in the most natural tone that he could assume.

"This friend desires to ask advice from your Majesty."

"From me?"

"What is there astonishing in that, sire? Remember the old soldier of Actium, who, when engaged in a law-suit, sought advice from Augustus."

"Augustus was a lawyer, René, and I am not."

"Sire, when my friend entrusted this secret to me, your Majesty still belonged to the Calvinistic party, of which you were the chief leader, and M. de Condé the second."

"Well?" said Henri.

"This friend hoped that you would use your all-powerful influence with the Prince de Condé to entreat the Prince not to be hostile to him."

"You must explain that to me, René, if you wish me to understand it," said Henri, without betraying the least change in voice or features.

"Sire, your Majesty will understand at the first word; this friend knows all the particulars with respect to the attempt made to poison the Prince de Condé."

"There was an attempt to poison the Prince de Condé?" asked Henri, with well-feigned astonishment; "indeed! and when was that?"

René fixed his glance upon the King and replied:

"A week ago, your Majesty."

"By some enemy?" asked the King.

"Yes," answered René, "by an enemy whom your Majesty knows, and who knows your Majesty."

"As a matter of fact, I had heard it

spoken of," said Henri, "but I am ignorant of the details which your friend, you say, wishes to disclose to me."

"Well, a perfumed apple was offered to the Prince de Condé, but, happily, his doctor happened to be there when it was brought to him. He took it from the messenger's hand and smelt it to test its fragrance and virtue. Two days later, a gangrenous swelling, an extravasation of blood, and an open wound on the face, were the price paid for his devotion, or, if you prefer it, the result of his imprudence."

"Unfortunately," answered Henri, "being already half a Catholic, I have lost all influence with M. de Condé; your friend will be wrong in applying to me."

"It was not only with the Prince de Condé that your Majesty's influence might be of service to my friend, but also with the Prince de Porcian, the brother of the one who was poisoned."

"Look here, René," said Charlotte, "do you know that your stories are rather blood-curdling. You make your request at an unseasonable time. It is late, and your conversation is creepy; in good sooth, sir, I would rather have your perfumes."

And Charlotte extended her hand again towards the box of salve.

"Madame," said René, "instead of trying that paste, as you are going to do, listen to the cruel results that wicked people are able to extract from it."

"You are certainly funereal this evening, René," said the Baronne.

Henri frowned, but he perceived that René wished to reach a goal of which as yet he had but got a glimpse, and he determined to pursue to the end this conversation, which aroused in his mind such painful memories.

"And you know also," he resumed, "the details of the poisoning of the Prince de Porcian?"

"Yes," said he. "It is known that it was his habit to leave a lamp burning by his bed-side every night; poison was mixed with the oil, and he was suffocated by the fumes."

Henri clasped his fingers, which were moist with perspiration.

"So then," he muttered, "the man whom you call your friend knows not only all the details of this poisoning, but the author as well."

"Yes, and that is why he wished to

learn from you if you would exercise your influence with the surviving Prince de Porcian to induce him to pardon the murderer of his brother."

"Unfortunately," answered Henri, "being still half a Huguenot, I have no influence with the Prince de Porcian: your friend will be wrong in applying to me."

"But what do you think of the dispositions of the Prince de Condé and M. de Porcian?"

"How should I know their dispositions, René? God has not given me, so far as I know, the power of reading the heart."

"Your Majesty can question yourself," said the Florentine, calmly. "Is there not in your Majesty's life any dark passage which may serve as a test for your clemency, some passage so painful that it may act as a touchstone for your generosity?"

These words were uttered in a tone that made Charlotte herself shudder: the allusion was so pointed and direct that the young woman turned round in order to conceal her confusion and to avoid Henri's glance.

Henri made a supreme effort over himself; his brow, on which a menacing cloud had gathered while the Florentine was speaking, cleared, and changing the noble filial grief which wrung his heart into a tone of vague meditation, he replied:

"Some dark passage in my life . . . no, René, no; I recall in my youth nought but folly and carelessness, conjoined with those more or less cruel acts of necessity which the wants of nature and the trials of God impose upon all men."

René, in his turn, put a constraint upon himself in directing his gaze from Henri to Charlotte, as though to arouse the one and to restrain the other; for Charlotte had, in point of fact, resumed her toilet in order to disguise the annoyance which the conversation was causing her, and had just extended her hand once more towards the box of salve.

"But, sire, supposing that you were the brother of the Prince de Porcian, or the son of the Prince de Condé, and that your brother had been poisoned or your father assassinated. . . ."

Charlotte uttered a slight cry, and put the paste once more close to her lips. René saw the movement; but this time he did not stop her, either by word or gesture, but exclaimed:

"In God's name, answer, Sire; were you in their place, what would you do?"

Henri collected himself, with a trembling hand wiping his brow, on which stood some drops of cold perspiration, and rising to his full height, while René and Charlotte held their breath in suspense, he made answer:

"Were I in their place, and were I certain of becoming King—of representing God, that is to say, on earth—I would act like God, and would forgive."

"Madame," cried René, snatching the salve from the hand of Madame de Sauve, "give me that box; my apprentice has made a mistake, I see, in bringing it to you; I will send you another to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIII

A CONVERT

A HUNTING party was arranged for the next day in the forest of Saint-Germain.

Henri had given orders that a little Béarnais horse, which he intended giving to Madame de Sauve, but wished to try beforehand, should be ready saddled and bridled at eight in the morning. The horse was in readiness at a quarter to eight, and Henri came down as the hour struck.

The horse, keen and spirited, in spite of its small size, was tossing its mane and pawing the ground in the courtyard. The night had been cold, and there was a sprinkling of hoarfrost.

Henri was preparing to cross the courtyard, in order to reach the stables where the horse and groom were awaiting him, when, on passing in front of a Swiss, who was on sentry-duty at the gate, the soldier presented arms with the words:

"God defend his Majesty the King of Navarre!"

At this wish, and above all, at the tones of the voice that uttered it, the Béarnais started.

He turned round and stepped backwards.

"De Mouy!" he murmured.

"Yes, sire, De Mouy."

"What are you doing here?"

"I am looking for you."

"What do you want with me?"

"I must have a word with your Majesty."

"Don't you know," said the King, stepping closer to him, "that unfortunately you are risking your head?"

"I know it."

"Well?"

"Well, here I am."

Henri paled slightly, for he realised that he, too, shared the danger which the zealous De Mouy was incurring. He, therefore, looked round uneasily, and stepped back once more, no less quickly than the first time.

He had just caught sight of the Duc d'Alençon at a window.

Immediately altering his line of conduct, Henri took the musket from the hands of De Mouy, who, as we have said, was acting as sentry, and pretending all the time to be examining it:

"De Mouy," said he, "you certainly have not thrown yourself into the wolf's jaws in this way without some very powerful motive?"

"No, sire, and so I have been watching you for the last week. It was only yesterday that I learnt that your Majesty was to try this horse this morning, and I took up my post at the gate of the Louvre."

"But how in this costume?"

"The captain of the company is a Protestant, and a friend of mine."

"Here is your musket, go back to your duty. We are being watched. When I return I will try and have a word with you, but if I do not speak, do not stop me. Farewell."

De Mouy resumed his measured tread, and Henri proceeded towards the horse.

"What pretty little animal is that?" asked the Duc d'Alençon from his window.

"It is a horse that I want to try this morning," answered Henri.

"But that is not a man's horse."

"No, it is intended for a fair lady."

"Take care, Henri, you are going to be imprudent, for we shall see this fair lady at the hunt; and if I do not know whose cavalier you are, I shall at least know whose riding-master you are."

"No, egod! you will not," said Henri, with his assumed good-nature, "for the lady cannot come out, being seriously indisposed this morning."

And he sprang into the saddle.

"Pooh!" said d'Alençon, laughing, "poor Madame de Sauve!"

"François! François! it is you who are imprudent."

"And what is the matter, then, with the fair Charlotte?" resumed the Duc d'Alençon.

"Why," continued Henri, putting his horse to a gentle gallop, and making him describe a circle, "a great heaviness in the head, so Dariole tells me, and a sort of numbness in her whole body, together with a general feeling of weakness."

"And will that prevent you from joining us?" asked the Duke.

"Me! why should it?" replied Henri; "you know that I am mad on hunting, and that nothing would make me miss it."

"You will miss it to-day, however, Henri," said the Duke, after turning round, and speaking for a moment to someone at the further end of the room who was invisible to Henri, "for here is his Majesty, who tells me that the hunt cannot take place to-day."

"Deuce take it!" said Henri, in a most disappointed tone; "why is that?"

"Very important letters from M. de Nevers, it appears. There is a consultation between the King, the Queen-Mother, and my brother, the Duc d'Anjou."

"Ah!" said Henri to himself, "can news have arrived from Poland?" Then aloud:

"In that case," he continued, "it is useless to risk myself any longer on this slippery ground. Au revoir, brother."

Then, stopping his horse in front of De Mouy:

"My friend," said he, "call one of your comrades to take your place: help the groom to un-saddle this horse, put the saddle on your head and carry it to the silversmith; he has a piece of silver embroidery which he had not time to put on it. You will come to me and bring his answer."

De Mouy hastened to obey, for the Duc d'Alençon had disappeared from the window, and it was clear that he entertained some suspicion.

In point of fact, he had hardly passed the wicket when the Duke appeared. A real Swiss occupied De Mouy's place.

The Duke looked narrowly at the new sentry, then, turning towards Henri:

"That is not the man you were talking to just now, brother, is it?"

"No, the other man belongs to my house, and I have had him put into the Swiss Guard; I have given him a commission which he has gone to execute."

"Ah!" said the Duke, as though satisfied with the explanation: "and how is Marguerite?"

"I am going to ask her."

"Haven't you seen her, then, since yesterday?"

"No; I went to her rooms last night at about eleven, but Gillonne told me she was tired, and had gone to sleep."

"You will not find her in her room, she has gone out."

"Yes," said Henri, "it is quite possible; she had to go to the Convent of the Annunciation."

It was impossible to continue the conversation, as Henri seemed determined only to give answers.

The brothers-in-law accordingly separated, the Duc d'Alençon to go in search of news, as he said; the King of Navarre to return to his apartments.

Henri had hardly been there five minutes, when he heard a knock.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Sire," answered a voice, which he recognised as De Mouy's, "it is the answer from the silversmith."

Henri, with visible emotion, admitted the young man, and closed the door behind him.

"You, De Mouy!" said he, "I hoped that you would reflect."

"Sire," answered De Mouy, "I have been reflecting for three months, and that is long enough; now is the time for action."

Henri made a gesture of uneasiness.

"Fear nothing, sire, we are alone, and I am in a hurry, for time is precious. Your Majesty can restore, by a single word, all that has been lost to the cause of the Religion by the events of this year. Let us be explicit, brief, and frank."

"I am listening, my brave De Mouy," answered Henri, seeing that it was impossible to avoid an explanation.

"Is it true that your Majesty has abjured the Protestant religion?"

"It is true," said Henri.

"Yes, but with the lips, or from the heart?"

"A man is always grateful to God

when He saves his life," answered Henri, parrying the question as was his habit in similar cases, "and God has clearly spared me from this cruel danger."

"Sire," resumed De Mouy, "confess one thing."

"What is that?"

"That your abjuration is not a matter of conviction, but of calculation. You have abjured in order that the King might let you live, and not because God has spared your life."

"Be the cause of my conversion what it may, De Mouy, I am none the less a Catholic."

"Yes, but will you remain so always? will you not resume your liberty of life and conscience at the first opportunity which offers? Well! that opportunity presents itself at this moment. La Rochelle has risen in insurrection, Rousillon and Béarn await but a word to follow suit; Guienne is clamorous for war. Only tell me that you are a Catholic under compulsion, and I will answer to you as regards the future."

"A man of my rank is not forced, my dear De Mouy; what I have done, I have done voluntarily."

"But, sire," said the young man, his heart sinking at this unexpected resistance, "do you not think that in acting thus you are abandoning . . . betraying us?"

Henri remained unmoved by this appeal.

"Yes," continued De Mouy, "you are betraying us, sire, for many of us have come, at the peril of our lives, to save your honour and your liberty. We have made all arrangements for giving you a throne; do you understand, sire? not merely liberty, but power; a throne at your own choice, for within two months you may choose between Navarre and France."

"De Mouy," said Henri, lowering his eyes which, at this proposal, had flashed involuntarily, "De Mouy, I am in safety, I am a Catholic, I am the husband of Marguerite, I am the brother of King Charles and the son-in-law of my good mother Catherine. In assuming these various relationships, I have calculated the chances, but also the obligations."

"But, sire," replied De Mouy, "what are we to believe? I am told that your marriage has not been consummated, that at the bottom of your heart you are free, that the hatred of Catherine . . ."

"Lies! lies!" interrupted Henri eagerly. "Yes, my friend, you have been shamelessly imposed upon. Marguerite is in every sense my wife, Catharine my mother, King Charles the lord and master of my life and my heart."

De Mouy shuddered, and an almost contemptuous smile crossed his lips. "So then, sire," said he, letting his arms fall dejectedly, and trying to fathom the glance of the impenetrable character confronting him, "that is the answer that I am to take back to my comrades. I am to tell them that the King of Navarre gives his hand and his heart to those who have butchered us, that he has become the sycophant of the Queen-Mother, and the friend of De Maurevel . . ."

"My dear De Mouy," said Henri, "the King is about to quit the council, and I must go and find out from him the reasons that have caused the postponement of a thing so important as a hunting-party. Farewell, my friend, follow my example and leave politics alone; come back to the King and take the Mass."

And Henri led, or rather pushed back into the ante-chamber the young man, whose astonishment began to give place to rage.

Hardly had he closed the door than, unable to resist the desire to wreak his vengeance on some *thing* in default of some person, De Mouy crushed his hat between his hands, threw it on the ground, and trampling it under foot as the bull does the cloak of the matador:

"Zounds!" he cried, "a contemptible prince; I should like to be killed on the spot, so as to stain him for ever with my blood."

"Hush! Monsieur de Mouy!" said the voice of some one, slipping through a half-opened door. "Hush! for somebody besides myself might hear you."

De Mouy turned quickly, and perceived the Duc d'Alençon, wrapped in a cloak, and peering with his pale face into the corridor to make certain that he and De Mouy were alone.

The Duc d'Alençon, exclaimed De Mouy, "I am lost."

"On the contrary," murmured the Prince, "you have even perhaps discovered what you are in search of, the proof of which is that I do not wish you to be killed here, as you were intending. Believe me, your blood can be better

employed than in reddening the doorstep of the King of Navarre."

And with these words the Duke opened to its full extent the door which he had held half closed.

This room belongs to two of my gentlemen," said the Duke. "Nobody will come here to hunt us out, so we can talk freely. Come in, sir."

"Here I am, Monseigneur," said the astonished conspirator.

He entered the room, and the Duke closed the door behind him no less quickly than the King of Navarre had done.

De Mouy had entered in a state of fury and exasperation, but gradually the cold fixed gaze of the young Duc François produced upon the Huguenot leader the effect of that enchanted mirror which banishes intoxication.

"Monseigneur," said he, "if I understood rightly, your Highness wishes to speak to me?"

"Yes, Monsieur de Mouy. I thought that I recognised you, spite of your disguise, and when you presented arms to my brother Henri, I was certain that I was not mistaken. Well! De Mouy, you are not pleased with the King of Navarre?"

"Monseigneur!"

"Come, talk to me frankly; perhaps I am your friend, though you do not suspect it."

"You, Monseigneur!"

"Yes, I; so speak out."

"I don't know what to say to your Highness. What I had to discuss with the King of Navarre touches interests which your Highness cannot understand. Besides," added De Mouy, in a tone which he strove to render indifferent, "the matter was a trifling one."

"Trifling?" said the Duke.

"Yes, Monseigneur."

"A trifling matter for which you thought it your duty to risk your life by returning to the Louvre where, as you know, your head is worth its weight in gold, for nobody is ignorant of the fact that you, together with the King of Navarre and the Prince de Condé, are the chief leaders of the Huguenots."

"If you believe that, Monseigneur, deal with me as the brother of King Charles and the son of Queen Catherine should do."

"Why should I do that, when I have

told you that I am your friend? Tell me the truth, 'ben."

"Monseigneur, I swear to you . . ."

"Do not swear, sir, the Reformed Religion forbids oaths, and especially false oaths."

De Mouy frowned.

"I tell you I know all," continued the Duke.

De Mouy remained silent.

"You doubt it?" resumed the Duke, with friendly persistence. "Well, my dear De Mouy, I must convince you; come, you shall judge if I am wrong. Have you, or have you not, proposed to my brother-in-law Henri, just now, in there"—the Duke pointed with his hand in the direction of the King's apartment—"your aid and that of your party to re-establish him in his kingdom of Navarre?"

De Mouy stared aghast at the Duke.

"A proposal which he declined with horror."

De Mouy remained dumbfounded.

"Did you, thereupon, appeal to your old friendship, to the memory of your common religion? Did you even lure him on with a brilliant hope, a hope so brilliant that he was dazzled by it, the hope of attaining the crown of France? Tell me, am I well informed, eh? Was that your proposal?"

"Monseigneur!" cried De Mouy, "so much so was it my proposal that I am asking myself at this moment whether I ought not to tell your Royal Highness that you have lied! Whether I ought not to provoke in this chamber a combat without quarter, and thus assure by the death of both of us the extinction of this terrible secret."

"Softly, my brave De Mouy, softly!" said the Duke, without changing countenance or making the slightest movement in reply to this terrible threat; "the secret will perish better between us if we both live than if one of us were to die. Listen to me, and stop worrying the hilt of your sword in that way. For the third time I tell you that you are with a friend; answer, therefore, as you would to a friend. Come, has not the King of Navarre refused all that you offered him?"

"Yes, Monseigneur, and I confess it, since the avowal can compromise no one but myself."

"Did you not shout out, when you left

his chamber and trampled your hat under foot, that he was a cowardly prince and unworthy to remain your leader?"

"It is true, Monseigneur, I said so."

"Ah! it is true! You confess it, in short?"

"Yes."

"And that is your opinion still?"

"More than ever, Monseigneur."

"Well, Monsieur de Mouy, am I, the third son of Henri II., I, a Son of France, am I a gentleman good enough to command your soldiers, and do you reckon me sufficiently trustworthy for you to be able to rely upon my word?"

"You, Monseigneur! You, the leader of the Huguenots!"

"Why not? Conversions are in the fashion, you know. Henri has turned Catholic, I may well turn Protestant."

"Yes, Monseigneur, no doubt; so I am waiting for you to explain . . ."

"Nothing more simple, and I will tell you in two words the political position of every one of them."

"My brother, Charles, kills the Huguenots in order that his throne may be more secure. My brother, of Anjou, allows them to be killed because he will succeed Charles, who, as you know, is often in a weak state of health. I, however, am in quite a different position. I shall never reign, in France at least, seeing that two elder brothers stand before me; I, who am separated from the throne even more effectually by the hatred of my mother and my brothers than by the law of nature; I, who cannot lay claim to any family affection, to any glory, to any sovereignty; I, who nevertheless possess a heart as noble as my elders; well, De Mouy, I desire to carve out for myself with my sword a Kingdom within this France which they are deluging with blood."

"Now listen, De Mouy, this is what I want."

"I want to be King of Navarre, not by birth, but by election. And observe that you have no objection to offer to that, for I should not be a usurper, inasmuch as my brother Henri declines your proposals and, plunged in his torpor, loftily decides that this Kingdom of Navarre is but an imaginary one. In Henri de Béarn you have a man who is of no use to you; in me you have a sword and a name. François d'Alençon, Son of France, throws the mantle of his

protection over all his comrades, or his accomplices, if you please to call them so. Well, Monsieur de Mouy, what say you to this offer?"

"I say that it dazzles me, Monseigneur."

"De Mouy, we shall have many obstacles to overcome, so do not show yourself from the very start so unreasonable and so hard to please to a son of a King and a brother of a King, who comes over to your side."

"Monseigneur, the matter would be already settled had I only myself to consider; but we have a Council, and however brilliant the offer—perhaps even on account of its brilliancy—the Chiefs of the Party will not close with it except upon conditions."

"That is another matter, and your answer is the answer of an honest heart and a prudent mind. From the way in which I have just acted, you, De Mouy, must have recognised my honesty. Treat me then on your side as a man whom you respect, and not as a prince whom you flatter. De Mouy, have I any chance of success?"

"Upon my word, Monseigneur, since your Highness wishes for my opinion, your Highness has every chance since the King of Navarre has refused the offer which I came to make him; but I repeat, Monseigneur, it is indispensable that I should confer with my leaders."

"Do so, sir, only when shall I have your answer?"

De Mouy looked at the Duke in silence; then, appearing to come to a determination:

"Monseigneur," said he, "give me your hand; the hand of a Son of France must touch mine to assure me that I shall not be betrayed."

The Duke not only extended his hand, but took De Mouy's and pressed it.

"Now, Monseigneur, my mind is at rest. If we are betrayed, I shall say that you are not responsible: otherwise, Monseigneur, however little you might be concerned in that betrayal, you would be dishonoured."

"Why do you say this to me, De Mouy, before telling me when you will bring the answer from your leaders?"

"Because, Monseigneur, by asking me when I shall bring the answer, you ask me at the same time where the leaders are; and if I should reply, 'this evening,'

you will know that the leaders are in hiding in Paris."

With these words, De Mouy, with an air of distrust, fastened his piercing gaze on the false and hesitating glance of the young Prince.

"Come, come, Monsieur de Mouy, you are still suspicious. Still, I cannot claim your entire confidence all at once; later on you will know me better. We are going to be united by a community of interests, which will relieve you of all suspicion. You say this evening then, Monsieur de Mouy?"

"Yes, Monseigneur, for time presses. This evening. But where, please?"

"Here, at the Louvre, in this room, if convenient to you."

"This room is occupied?" said De Mouy, indicating by his glance the two beds which stood opposite to each other.

"Yes, by two of my gentlemen."

"For my part, Monseigneur, it seems imprudent for me to return to the Louvre."

"Why so?"

"Because, if you recognised me, others may have as sharp eyes as your Highness and recognise me also. I will return here, however, if you will grant what I am about to ask."

"What is that?"

"A safe-conduct."

"De Mouy, a safe-conduct from me found upon you would ruin me and would not protect you. I can do nothing for you except on the condition that we are perfect strangers to one another in the eyes of all. The slightest discovery of my relations with you, if proved to my mother or my brothers, would cost me my life. You are safe-guarded, then, by my own interests, from the moment that I compromise myself with the others as I am compromising myself with you at this moment. Free in my sphere of action, powerful if I am unsuspected, so long as I myself remain unfathomable, I can protect all of you; do not forget that. Make a fresh appeal then to your courage, rely on my word as you relied on that of my brother, Henri, and come this evening to the Louvre."

"But how do you mean me to come? I cannot venture into the apartments in this costume; it was meant for the courtyard and the corridors . . . My own costume is more dangerous still, for everybody knows me here, and it

does not disguise me in the slightest degree."

"That is why I am looking, wait . . . I think . . . yes . . . here."

The Duke, in point of fact, had looked all round him, and his eyes had fastened on the wardrobe of La Mole, which, for the time being, was laid out upon the bed—namely, on the splendid cherry-coloured cloak embroidered with gold, which we have already mentioned, a hat adorned with a white feather, and surrounded by a string of gold and silver marguerites intermingled, and, lastly, a grey satin doublet.

"Do you see this cloak, hat, and doublet," said the Duke, "they belong to M. de La Mole, one of my gentlemen, and a fop of the first water. This cloak has made a sensation at the Court, and La Mole can be recognised a hundred yards off when he wears it. I will give you the address of the tailor who supplied him with it; by paying him double what it is worth you will get another like it this evening. You will remember the name of La Mole, won't you?"

The Duke had hardly completed his instructions, when the sound of approaching steps was heard in the corridor, and a key turned in its lock.

"Who is there?" cried the Duke, rushing to the door and drawing the bolt.

"Egod!" replied a voice from outside, "that's a strange question. Who are you, yourself? That's a good joke; when I want to enter my own room I am asked, 'Who is there?'"

"Is it you, Monsieur de La Mole?"

"Of course it is, but who are you?"

While La Mole was expressing his astonishment at finding his chamber occupied, and was trying to discover who his new fellow-lodger was, the Duc d'Alençon turned round quickly with one hand on the bolt and the other on the lock.

"Do you know M. de La Mole?" he asked De Mouy.

"No, Monseigneur."

"Does he know you?"

"I don't think so."

"It is all right, then; besides, pretend to be looking out of the window."

De Mouy obeyed without replying, for La Mole was becoming impatient, and was knocking with all his might.

The Duke took a final glance at De Mouy, and seeing that his back was turned, opened the doors.

"Monseigneur!" cried La Mole, retreating in surprise, "Oh! pardon, pardon, Monseigneur!"

"It is all right, sir; I wanted your room to receive a visitor in."

"You are welcome, Monseigneur; but allow me, I beg you, to take my hat and cloak, which are on the bed; for I have lost both hat and cloak this evening on the Quai de La Grève, where I was attacked by thieves."

"Indeed, sir," said the Prince, with a smile, giving La Mole with his own hands the objects he had asked for, "you appear to have been very badly treated, and to have encountered some desperate ruffians."

The Duke handed the hat and cloak to La Mole, who bowed and went out to put them on in the ante-chamber, without troubling himself in the least as to what the Duke was doing in his room, since it was a common practice at the Louvre for the apartments of the gentlemen to be employed as reception rooms for visitors of all kinds by the Princes in whose service they were employed.

De Mouy then advanced to the Duke, and both listened for the moment when La Mole should finish his toilet and go out; however, when La Mole had changed his costume, he himself relieved them from their difficulty by approaching the door and saying:

"Pardon, Monseigneur, but your Highness did not meet the Comte de Coconnas on your way?"

"No, sir, I did not; and yet he was on duty this morning."

"Then he must have been murdered," said La Mole to himself as he hurried away.

The Duke listened to the sound of his steps as they grew less distinct; then, opening the door, and drawing De Mouy after him:

"Look at him as he walks away," said he, "and try to copy his inimitable swagger."

"I will do my best," answered De Mouy. "Unfortunately I am not a popinjay, but a soldier."

"In any case I shall expect you in this corridor before midnight. If my gentlemen's room is at liberty, I will receive you there; if not, we will find another."

"Yes, Monseigneur."

"This evening, then, before midnight."

"This evening, before midnight."

"Ah! by the bye, De Mouy, swing your right arm well when you walk; that is a characteristic trick of M. de La Mole's."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RUE TIZON AND THE RUE CLOCHE-PERCÉE.

LA MOLE rushed out of the Louvre and began to scour Paris in search of the unhappy Coconnas.

His first care was to betake himself to the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec, and visit Master la Hurière, for La Mole remembered having often quoted to the Piedmontese a Latin maxim tending to prove that Amor, Bacchus, and Ceres were the three divinities most necessary to man, and he hoped to find Coconnas, in pursuance of that Latin aphorism, installed at the *Belle-Etoile* after a night that must have been no less busily employed than his own had been.

La Mole gained nothing at La Hurière's, except that the latter remembered the obligation which he had undertaken, and with a fairly good grace offered a meal which our gentleman accepted, and to which, notwithstanding his anxiety, he did ample justice.

Having appeased his stomach, if not his mind, La Mole resumed his quest, walking alongside the Seine, upstream. On reaching the Quai de la Grève, he recognised the spot where, as he had told M. d'Alençon, he had been stopped in the course of his nocturnal rambles three or four hours earlier—a kind of incident by no means rare in a Paris older by a hundred years than that in which Boileau was awakened by the sound of a bullet piercing his shutters. A small piece of the feather of his hat had remained on the field of battle. The love of possession is innate in man. La Mole possessed ten feathers, each finer than the other; none the less did he stop to pick up this one, or, rather, the only fragment of it which had survived, and was examining it with a rueful countenance, when he heard the sound of heavy steps approaching him, and rude voices ordering him to make way. La Mole looked up and saw a

litter, preceded by two pages, and escorted by an esquire.

La Mole thought that he recognised the litter and hastened to move out of the way; nor was he mistaken.

"Monsieur de La Mole!" cried a sweet voice from within the litter, while a white hand, soft as satin, parted the curtains.

"Yes, Madame, it is I," answered La Mole bowing.

"Monsieur de La Mole with a feather in his hand . . ." continued the lady in the litter; "are you in love then, sir, and are you following up the lady's lost tracks?"

"Yes, Madame," answered La Mole, "and deeply in love; but, for the moment, it is my own tracks that I am following, though it is not for them that I am searching. Will your Majesty permit me to ask how your health is?"

"Excellent, sir; I have never felt better, I believe; probably because I spent the night in retirement."

"Oh! in retirement," said La Mole, regarding Marguerite curiously.

"Well, yes; what is there surprising in that?"

"May I, without indiscretion, ask you in what convent?"

"Certainly, sir, I make no mystery of it; at the Convent of the Annunciation. But what are you doing here with that scared appearance?"

"Madame, I also passed the night in retirement and in the neighbourhood of the same convent; this morning I am looking for my friend, who has disappeared, and in looking for him I have found this feather."

"Does it belong to him? Truly you alarm me on his account; this place has a bad reputation."

"Let your Majesty be reassured, the feather belongs to me; I lost it here at about half-past five while escaping from the hands of four bandits who were determined, to the best of my belief at least, to murder me."

Marguerite repressed a hasty movement of alarm.

"Oh! tell me about it," said she.

"Nothing easier, Madame. It was, as I had the honour to tell your Majesty, about half-past five in the morning . . ."

"And had you already gone out at that early hour?" interrupted Marguerite.

"Your Majesty will pardon me, I had not yet come in."

"Ah! Monsieur de La Mole, you were coming home at five in the morning!" said Marguerite, with a smile which to the eyes of anyone else would have seemed fraught with malice, but which La Mole was fatuous enough to think adorable, "coming home so late! you deserved your punishment."

"And I am not complaining, Madame," said La Mole, bowing respectfully; "and even if I had been killed, I should esteem myself happier than I deserved to be. But, anyhow, I was returning, late or early, as your Majesty pleases, from that happy house where I had passed the night in retirement, when four rapscallions turned out of the Rue de la Mortellerie and pursued me, brandishing prodigious great fighting irons. It is ridiculous, Madame, is it not, but such was the case; I was obliged to fly, as I had forgotten my sword."

"Oh! I understand," said Marguerite, with an admirable air of innocence, "and you are returning to look for your sword?"

La Mole looked at Marguerite as though a doubt had crossed his mind.

"Madame, I should certainly return there very willingly, for my sword is an excellent blade, but I do not know where that house is."

"What, sir!" replied Marguerite, "you don't know where the house is where you spent the night?"

"No Madame, Beelzebub have me if I have the faintest notion."

"How very strange! why, your story is quite a romance, then?"

"A veritable romance, Madame, as you say."

"Tell me about it."

"It is rather long."

"Never mind! I have plenty of time."

"And quite incredible into the bargain."

"Go on; I am a most credulous person."

"Your Majesty commands me?"

"Why, yes, if I must."

"I will obey then. Yesterday evening, after leaving the two adorable ladies with whom we had spent the evening on the Pont Saint-Michel, we supped with Master La Hurière."

"In the first place," asked Marguerite, quite naturally, "who may Master La Hurière be?"

"Master La Hurière, Madame," said La Mole, again looking at Marguerite with the air of doubt which he had previously displayed, "is the landlord of

the Inn of the *Belle-Etoile* in the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec."

"Yes, I can see it from here . . . So you were supping at Master La Hurière's with your friend Coconnas, no doubt?"

"Yes, Madame, with my friend Coconnas, when a man came in and handed each of us a note."

"Both alike?" asked Marguerite.

"Exactly alike: each contained merely this line:—

"You are expected in the Rue Saint-Antoine, opposite the Rue de Jouy.

"Was there no signature attached?" asked Marguerite.

"No; but there were three words; three charming words, which conveyed the same idea in different terms; a triple happiness, that is to say."

"And what were those three words?"

"*Eros, Cupido, Amor.*"

"Three sweet names, indeed; and did they fulfil their promise?"

"Oh! more, Madame, a hundred-fold more!" cried La Mole, with enthusiasm.

"Go on; I am curious to know what awaited you in the Rue Saint-Antoine, opposite the Rue de Jouy."

"Two duennas awaited us, each with a handkerchief in her hand. We had to let our eyes be bandaged. Your Majesty will guess that we made no difficulty on that point. We surrendered ourselves bravely to the operation. My guide made me turn to the left, my friend's guide turned him to the right, and we separated."

"And then?" continued Marguerite, who appeared determined to pursue the inquiry to the end.

"I don't know," resumed La Mole, "where my friend's guide conducted him; to hell, possibly. But for myself, all I know is that mine led me to a place which I regard as Paradise."

"From which, doubtless, your excessive curiosity caused you to be banished?"

"Exactly so, Madame; you have the gift of divination. I waited impatiently for daylight, so as to see where I was, when, at half-past four, the same duenna came in, bandaged my eyes afresh, made me promise not to try to remove the handkerchief, led me out of the house, accompanied me for a hundred yards or so, and again made me swear not to remove the bandage until I had counted

another fifty yards. I did so, and then found myself in the Rue Saint-Antoine, opposite the Rue de Jouy."

"And then . . ."

"Then, Madame, I came back in such a state of happiness that I paid no attention to the four ruffians from whom I escaped with such damage. Well, Madame, when I discovered a scrap of my feather here, my heart leaped for joy, and I picked it up promising myself that I would cherish it as a souvenir of that happy night. But my happiness is dashed by one thing, namely, anxiety as to what can have become of my companion."

"He has not returned to the Louvre, then?"

"Alas! no, Madame. I have searched every place where he might be—at the *Belle-Etoile*, at the tennis-court, and a number of other respectable places; but no Hannibal, and no Coconnas either . . ."

As he said these words, accompanying them with a gesture of lamentation, La Mole extended his arms, thus opening his cloak and disclosing his doublet pierced in several places, through which the lining was protruding.

"Why, you have been riddled!" said Marguerite.

"Riddled is just the word," said La Mole, not sorry to make a merit of the danger he had run. "Look, Madame, look!"

"How is it you didn't change your doublet at the Louvre, since you went back there?" asked the Queen.

"Ah!" said La Mole, "because there was someone in my chamber."

"What! someone in your chamber?" said Marguerite, whose eyes conveyed the most lively astonishment; "and who was in your chamber, then?"

"His Highness."

"Hush!" interrupted Marguerite.

The young man obeyed.

"*Qui ad lecticam meam stant?*"

(Who are standing beside my litter?)

"*Duo pueri et unus eques.*"

(Two pages and an esquire.)

"*Optime, barbari! Dic, Moles, quem inveneris in cubiculo tuo?*"

(Good! they are foreigners. Tell me, La Mole, whom did you find in your room?)

"*Franciscum ducem.*" (The Duke François.)

"*Agentem?*" (Doing?)

"*Nescio quid.*" (I don't know what.)

"*Quocum?*" (With whom?)

"*Cum ignoto.*" (With a stranger.)

"It is very odd," said Marguerite.

"So you could not find Coconnas?" she continued, evidently not thinking of what she was saying.

"And so, Madame, as I have had the honour to inform your Majesty, I am dying of anxiety."

"Well!" said Marguerite, with a sigh, "I must not delay you any longer from your task; but I have an idea that he will find his way back by himself: never mind, go on with your search."

The Queen laid a finger on her lips. Now, as the fair Marguerite had neither confided any secret nor made any confession to La Mole, the young man understood that this charming gesture, not being intended to enjoin silence upon him, must have some other meaning.

The litter resumed its journey, and La Mole, still in pursuit of his investigation, continued walking along the Quay as far as the Rue du Long-Pont, which led into the Rue Saint-Antoine. Opposite the Rue de Jouy he stopped.

It was there that on the previous evening the two duennas had blindfolded his eyes and those of Coconnas. He had turned to the left and had then counted twenty paces; he now went through the same performance, and found himself opposite a house, or, rather, a wall behind which was a house; in the middle of this wall was a door studded with great nails. The house was situated in the Rue Cloche-Percée, a small, narrow street running from the Rue Saint-Antoine to the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile.

"Od's truth!" said La Mole, "this is the place. . . I could swear to it. . . . When I stretched out my hand as I was coming out, I felt the nails on the gate, then I went down two steps. The man who ran by shouting 'Help!' and who was killed in the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile, was passing just as I set foot on the first step. Let us see."

La Mole went to the gate and knocked.

The door was opened by a kind of porter, who wore moustaches.

"*Was ist das?*" (What is it) asked the porter.

"Ah!" said La Mole, "a Swiss, apparently."

"My friend," he continued, with his most insinuating air, "I want my sword,

which I left at this house, where I passed the night."

"*Ich verstehe nicht*," (I don't understand) replied the porter.

"My sword" . . . resumed La Mole.

"*Ich verstehe nicht*," repeated the porter.

"Which I left. . . . My sword, which I left. . . ."

"*Ich verstehe nicht*. . . ."

"In this house, where I passed the night."

"*Gehe zum Teufel*. . . ." (Go to the Devil.)

And he slammed the door in his face.

"Sdeath!" said La Mole, "if I only had that sword, I would gladly run it through that rogue's body But I haven't got it, and I shall have to wait for another day."

Whereupon La Mole went on as far as the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile, turned to the right, took about fifty paces, turned to the right once more, and found himself in the Rue Tizon, a small street running parallel with the Rue Cloche-Percée, to which it bore a very strong resemblance. In addition to this, he had scarcely taken thirty paces when he came upon another door with great nails, the two steps and the wall. You might really have thought that the Rue Cloche-Percée had turned round upon itself to watch him go by.

La Mole hereupon reflected that he might have mistaken his right for his left, and went to the door to make the same request that he had made at the other. But this time his knocking was in vain; the door was not even opened to him.

La Mole went over his ground two or three times, and then arrived at the very natural conclusion that the house had two entrances; one in the Cloche-Percée and the other in the Rue Tizon.

But he neither recovered his sword nor discovered the whereabouts of his friend by this conclusion, however logical.

For a moment he entertained the idea of buying another sword and ripping up the wretched porter who persisted in speaking nothing but German; he reflected, however, that if this porter was in Marguerite's service, and if she had chosen him on that account, she had her reasons for so doing, and would, perhaps, be annoyed at being deprived of him, and La Mole would not, for all the world, have wished to do anything displeasing to

Marguerite. Through fear, therefore, of yielding to temptation, he made his way back to the Louvre at about two in the afternoon.

He was able this time to enter his apartment, since it was not engaged. This was of urgent importance to him in regard to his doublet, at any rate, which, as the Queen had remarked to him, had been considerably damaged. He accordingly made straight for his bed, in order to substitute for it the handsome pearl-grey doublet. But to his great astonishment, the first thing that he saw close to the grey doublet was the famous sword which he had left in the Rue Cloche-Percée. La Mole seized it, and turned it over and over: there was no doubt about it.

"Hallo!" said he, "there must be some magic connected with this. Ah! if only poor Coconnas could be found, as my sword has been found."

Two or three hours after La Mole had ceased prowling round the little house with the double entrance, the door in the Rue Tizon opened. It was about five in the evening, and consequently quite dark. A woman in a long fur-trimmed mantle, accompanied by a maid, issued from this door, which was held open by a duenna of about forty, glided swiftly as far as the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile, knocked at a small door of the Hôtel d'Argenson, which was opened to her, came out again by the principal door of the same house, which opened on to the Vieille-rue-du-Temple, reached a small postern-gate in the Hôtel de Guise, opened it with a key which she carried in her pocket, and disappeared. Half-an-hour later, a young man with his eyes blindfolded came out by the same door of the same little house, guided by a woman, who led him to the corner of the Rue Geoffroy-Lasnier and the Rue de la Mortellerie. Arrived there, she bade him walk fifty paces and then remove his bandage. The young man scrupulously complied with his instructions, and at the agreed distance took off the handkerchief which covered his eyes.

"Sdeath!" he exclaimed, looking round him, "I'll be hanged if I know where I am. Six o'clock!" cried he, as he heard the bell of Notre-Dame strike the hour. "And what can have become of poor La Mole? I must run to the Louvre, and perhaps I shall get news of him there."

Saying thus, Coconnas ran down the

Rue de la Mortellerie, and reached the gates of the Louvre in less time than an ordinary horse would have taken, hustling and demolishing in his passage the moving hedge of worthy citizens who were peacefully strolling round the shops on the Place de Baudoyer, and entered the palace.

There he questioned Swiss and sentry. The Swiss was pretty sure that he had seen M. de La Mole come in during the morning, but he had not seen him go out. The sentry had only been on duty for an hour and a half, and had seen nothing of him. He ran to his chamber and hastily opened the door; but he found nothing there except La Mole's doublet all torn and slashed, which redoubled his anxiety.

Then he thought of La Hurière and rushed off to the worthy host of the *Belle-Etoile*. La Hurière had seen La Mole; La Mole had dined at the inn. Coconnas was accordingly completely reassured, and, being very hungry, demanded a meal in his turn. He was in two conditions requisite for supping well: his mind was easy and his stomach empty; he accordingly made such a good meal that it lasted until eight o'clock. Then, fortified by two bottles of an Anjou wine of which he was very fond, and which he tossed off with a gusto that betrayed itself in sundry winks and smackings of the lips, he resumed his search for La Mole, accompanying this new progress through the crowd by kicks and blows with his fist, proportioned to that increasing friendliness inspired by the comfortable feeling which always follows a good meal.

For a whole hour Coconnas paced the streets adjoining the Quai de La Grève, the Port au Charbon, the Rue Saint-Antoine, the Rue Tizon, and the Rue Cloche-Percée, to which last he thought his friend might have gone back. At last he bethought himself that there was one spot which La Mole could not fail to pass, namely, the wicket-gate at the Louvre, and he resolved to station himself there and await his return.

He was not more than a hundred yards from the Louvre, and was picking up a woman whose husband he had already upset, when in the distance he perceived in front of him, by the dim light of a large lantern suspended near the draw-bridge, the cherry-coloured mantle and white plume belonging to his friend, who

was disappearing like a ghost beneath the wicket as he returned the sentry's salute. The famous cherry-coloured mantle had created such a universal sensation that there was no possibility of mistaking him.

"'Slife!" cried Coconnas; "it is he this time; there he is, going in. Hi! hi! La Mole, hi! my friend. Plague take it! I thought I had a pretty loud voice; how is it that he didn't hear me? Luckily my legs are as strong as my voice, and I can catch him up."

Sustained by this hope, Coconnas rushed forward at full speed, and in a moment reached the Louvre; but spite of all his haste, the cherry-coloured cloak, which appeared to be in an equal hurry, disappeared beneath the vestibule just as he entered the courtyard.

"Hi! La Mole!" cried Coconnas, still rushing on, "why don't you wait for me; it is I, Coconnas! What the devil makes you run like that? Are you escaping from anyone?"

In point of fact, the red cloak, as though possessed of wings, seemed to be flying rather than climbing afoot to the second floor.

"Ah! you don't want to hear me!" cried Coconnas. "You are angry with me! Well, go to the devil, then! 'Sdeath! I am quite exhausted."

It was at the foot of the staircase that Coconnas hurled this reproach at the fugitive whom he ceased to pursue with his legs, but whom his eyes continued to follow through the well of the staircase, and who had now arrived opposite the apartment of Marguerite. Suddenly a woman came out of this apartment and grasped the arm of the man whom Coconnas had been pursuing.

"Oho!" said Coconnas, "that looks to me like Queen Marguerite. He was expected, then. That's quite another state of things, and I understand why he didn't answer me."

And he leaned over the balustrade, gazing up the opening of the staircase. After some words had been exchanged in low tones, he saw the red cloak follow the Queen into the room.

"Good! that's it," said Coconnas; "I was not mistaken: there are times when the presence of our best friend is inconvenient, and that is the case just now with La Mole." And Coconnas, quietly ascending the stairs, sat down on a

velvet-covered bench on the landing, saying to himself :

"Very good ; instead of overtaking him I will wait . . . yes ; but, now that I think of it, he is with the Queen of Navarre, which means that I shall have to wait a long time. Zounds ! but it's cold. Come, come, I can wait just as well in my room ; he will have to come back there, were it occupied by the devil."

He had hardly finished the words, and was proceeding to put his resolve into execution, when a light and active step resounded above his head, to the accompaniment of a little song so often heard on his friend's lips that Coconnas immediately craned his neck in the direction from which the sound came. La Mole was descending from the upper floor, the one on which his chamber was, and on seeing Coconnas he rushed down the stairs four at a time and threw himself into his arms.

"Why, egod ! it is you !" said Coconnas. "How the devil did you get out, then ?"

"*Pardieu !* by the Rue Cloche-Percée."

"No, no ; I am not talking of that house. . . ."

"From where do you mean, then ?"

"From the Queen."

"From the Queen ? . . ."

"Yes, the Queen of Navarre."

"I have not been with her."

"Oh ! come now !"

"My dear Hannibal, you are talking nonsense ; I have come from my room, where I have been waiting for you for the last two hours."

"You have come from your room ?"

"Yes."

"Then it wasn't you whom I pursued across the courtyard ?"

"When ?"

"A moment ago."

"No"

"It wasn't you who disappeared under the wicket ten minutes ago ?"

"No."

"Nor you who just now ran up this staircase as though you were pursued by a legion of devils ?"

"No."

"Egod !" cried Coconnas, "the wine of the *Belle-Etoile* isn't strong enough to have turned my head to that extent. I tell you that I just now saw your cherry-coloured cloak and white plume at the wicket of the Louvre, that I pursued

them both to the foot of this staircase, that your cloak, your plume, everything, down to the swinging of your arm, was awaited here by a lady whom I strongly suspect to be the Queen of Navarre, who dragged cloak, hat, and everything through that door, which, unless I am mistaken, is that of the fair Marguerite."

"Sdeath !" said La Mole, turning pale ; "are we betrayed already ?"

"Swear as much as you please," said Coconnas, "but don't tell me I am mistaken."

La Mole hesitated for a moment, pressing his head between his hands, and undecided between respect and jealousy ; his jealousy, however, carried the day, and rushing to the door he began to beat at it with might and main, producing an uproar which befitted but little the majesty of the place where he was.

"We shall get arrested," said Coconnas ; "but never mind, it is very amusing. I say, La Mole, are there any ghosts in the Louvre ?"

"I don't know," said the young man, pale as the feather which shaded his brow ; "but I always wanted to see one, and as the opportunity has presented itself, I shall do my best to get face to face with this one."

"I have no objection," said Coconnas, "but you had better knock more gently if you don't want to frighten it."

La Mole, for all his exasperation, grasped the truth of the remark, and continued to knock, but more gently.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RED CLOAK

COCONNAS had not been mistaken. The lady who stopped the cavalier of the red cloak was, in fact, the Queen of Navarre ; as for the knight of the red cloak, our readers have already guessed, we imagine, that he was none other than the brave De Mouy.

On recognising the Queen of Navarre, the young Huguenot had understood that some misapprehension had occurred ; but he did not venture to say a word, through fear lest Marguerite should utter some

cry which would betray him. He preferred, therefore, to let himself be led into the apartments, since, once there, he would be free to say to his fair conductress:

"Silence in return for silence, Madame."

In point of fact, Marguerite had gently pressed the arm of him whom, in the semi-darkness, she had taken for La Mole, and stooping to his ear, had said to him in Latin:

Sola sum; introito, carissime."
(Come in, dearest; I am alone.)

De Mouy, without replying, let himself be led in; but hardly had the door closed behind him, and he found himself in the ante-chamber, which was better lighted than the staircase, when Marguerite perceived that it was not La Mole.

The little cry of surprise which the prudent Huguenot had expected escaped from Marguerite at this instant; happily there was no longer cause for fear.

"Monsieur de Mouy!" said she, retreating backwards.

"The same, Madame, and I beg your Majesty to allow me to go on my way without mentioning my presence at the Louvre to anybody."

"Oh! Monsieur de Mouy, I was mistaken, then," said Marguerite.

"Yes, I understand," said De Mouy. "Your Majesty took me for the King of Navarre: I am the same height, have the same white plume, and many, wishing to flatter me, no doubt, have said, the same appearance."

Marguerite looked hard at De Mouy.

"Do you know, Latin, Monsieur de Mouy?" she asked.

"I did once, but I have forgotten it."

Marguerite smiled.

"Monsieur de Mouy," said she, "you may rely on my discretion. However, as I fancy that I know the name of the person for whom you are looking at the Louvre, I will offer you my services and conduct you to him."

"Pardon me, Madame; I believe you are mistaken, and are completely in ignorance. . . ."

"What!" cried Marguerite, "are you not looking for the King of Navarre?"

"Alas! Madame, I regret to have to ask you to conceal the fact of my presence at the Louvre from the King your husband most especially."

"Listen, Monsieur de Mouy," said Marguerite, with surprise; "I have

looked upon you hitherto as one of the staunchest leaders of the Huguenot Party, as one of the most loyal adherents of the King my husband; have I, then, been mistaken?"

"No, Madame, for even down to this morning I was all that you say."

"And why have you changed since this morning?"

"Madame," said De Mouy, bowing, "be good enough to excuse me from answering, and do me the favour to accept my homage."

And De Mouy, with firm but respectful demeanour, stepped towards the door by which he had entered.

Marguerite stopped him.

"However, Monsieur," said she, "if I might venture to ask for a word of explanation; you can rely upon my word, I think?"

"Madame," answered De Mouy, "I am constrained to keep silence, and from the fact that I have not yet replied to your Majesty you may infer how binding is this duty."

"However, sir. . . ."

"Your Majesty can destroy me, but you cannot require me to betray my new friends."

"But your old friends, sir, have they no claims upon you?"

"Those who have remained faithful, yes; not so those who have not only deserted us, but also proved unfaithful to themselves."

Marguerite, who became thoughtful and uneasy, was doubtless about to reply by a fresh question, when Gillonne suddenly rushed into the room.

"The King of Navarre!" she exclaimed.

"Which way is he coming?"

"By the secret corridor."

"Show this gentleman out by the other door."

"Impossible, Madame. Do you hear?"

"Someone is knocking?"

"Yes, at that very door."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"Go and see, and come back and tell me."

"Madame," said De Mouy, "might I venture to observe to your Majesty that, if the King of Navarre sees me in the Louvre at this hour and in this dress, I am lost."

Marguerite seized De Mouy, and dragging him to the famous closet:

"Go in there, sir," said she. "You will be as well concealed and, what is more, as safe as in your own house, for you are there on the faith of my word."

De Mouy rushed in hastily, and the door had hardly closed behind him when Henri appeared.

This time, Marguerite had no trouble to hide; she was merely sad, and love was very far from her thoughts.

As for Henri, he entered with that suspiciousness in regard to trifles which, even in moments that were less dangerous, made him take notice of the smallest details; all the more, then, in the circumstances in which he found himself, was he profoundly observant.

Accordingly, he instantly detected the cloud on Marguerite's brow.

"You are busy, Madame?" said he.

"I? yes, Sire, I was thinking."

"And you are right, Madame; thinking becomes you. I, too, was thinking; but unlike yourself, who seek solitude, I came down expressly to share my thoughts with you."

Marguerite gave the King a gesture of welcome, and motioning him to an arm-chair, seated herself on a chair of carved ebony, as finely wrought and as strong as steel.

A momentary silence ensued, which Henri was the first to break.

"I recollected, Madame, that my dreams as to the future had this in common with your own, that, though separated as husband and wife, we yet both desired to unite our fortunes."

"It is true, Sire."

"I think I understood also that, in any plans I might make for the elevation of us both, you told me that I should find in you not merely a faithful, but also an active ally."

"Yes, Sire, and all I ask is that, in setting about the work, you should soon give me the opportunity of co-operating with you."

"I am happy to find you so disposed, Madame, and I imagine that you have not for a moment entertained the suspicion that I should lose sight of the plan which I determined to carry out on the very day when, thanks to your courageous intervention, I became reasonably certain that my life would be saved."

"Monsieur, I believe that with you indifference is but a mask, and I have faith, not only in the predictions of the astrologers, but also in your own genius."

"What should you say, then, Madame, were somebody to thwart our plans and threaten to reduce us, you and me, to a position of mediocrity?"

"I should say that I was prepared to struggle with you, either secretly or openly, against that somebody, whoever he might be."

"Madame," continued Henri, "it is possible for you, is it not, to go this very moment to your brother, the Duc d'Alençon? You have his confidence, and he has a strong friendship for you. Might I venture to ask you to find out whether he is not at this very moment in secret conference with someone?"

Marguerite started.

"With whom, Monsieur?" she asked.

"With De Mouy."

"Why should I do that," asked Marguerite, repressing her emotion.

"Because, if it be so, Madame, farewell to all our projects—to mine, at least."

"Sire, speak low," said Marguerite, making signs at once with her eyes and her lips, and pointing with her finger to the closet.

"Oh!" said Henri, "someone there again? Upon my word, this closet is so often occupied that it makes your room uninhabitable."

Marguerite smiled.

"At least, tell me, is it still La Mole?" asked Henri.

"No, Sire, it is M. de Mouy."

"He?" exclaimed Henri in surprise, mingled with joy, "then he is not with the Duc d'Alençon? Oh! let him come here; let me speak to him. . . ."

Marguerite ran to the closet, and opened it; then, taking De Mouy by the hand, brought him without further preamble to the King of Navarre.

"Ah! Madame," said the young Huguenot, in a tone of reproach rather than of bitterness, "you have betrayed me in spite of your promise. What should you say if I avenged myself by telling. . . ."

"You will not avenge yourself, De Mouy," interrupted Henri, "or, at least, you shall listen to me first. Madame, see, I beg you, that no one overhears us."

Henri had scarcely spoken the words when Gillonne entered with a scared face, and whispered some words to Marguerite which made her spring from her chair. While she ran to the ante-chamber with Gillonne, Henri, without

troubling himself as to the cause which took her out of the room, inspected the bed, the alcove, and the hangings, and sounded the walls with his fingers. As for De Mouy, terrified at all these preliminaries, his first care was to assure himself that his sword was loose to the scabbard.

Marguerite, on leaving her bedchamber, had hurried into the ante-room and found herself confronted with La Mole, who, spite of all Gillonne's entreaties, had insisted on forcing his way in.

Coconnas was just behind him, ready to push him forward or to support his retreat, as occasion demanded.

"Ah! it is you, M. de La Mole," cried the Queen; "but what is the matter, and why are you so pale and trembling?"

"Madame," said Gillonne, "M. de La Mole knocked so persistently that I was obliged to open the door to him in spite of your Majesty's orders."

"What is the meaning of this?" said the Queen severely. "Is what I am told true, Monsieur de La Mole?"

"Madame, I wished to warn your Majesty that an unknown stranger, a robber possibly, had made his way into your rooms wearing my hat and cloak."

"You are mad, sir," said Marguerite, "for I see your cloak upon your shoulders, and I believe I also see your hat upon your head, though you are in the royal presence."

"Oh! pardon, Madame, pardon!" cried La Mole, hastily uncovering, "it is not, however, Heaven be witness, because I am lacking in respect."

"No, but lacking in faith, are you not?" said the Queen.

"What would you have?" cried La Mole, "when a man is with your Majesty, when he introduces himself under cover of my dress, and perhaps my name, who knows? . . ."

"A man!" said Marguerite, gently pressing her unhappy lover's arm: "A man . . . You are under the mark, Monsieur de La Mole. Put your head through the opening of the curtain and you will see *two* men."

Marguerite partially raised the velvet curtain, embroidered with gold, and La Mole recognised Henri in conversation with the man in the red cloak; Coconnas, as interested as though the matter concerned himself, also looked and

recognised De Mouy at a glance; both of them remained dumbfounded.

"Now that you are reassured, as I hope at least that you are," said Marguerite, "station yourself at the door of my apartment, and on your life, dear La Mole, let nobody enter. If anybody should even approach the head of the stairs, give warning."

La Mole, weak and obedient as a child, exchanged glances with Coconnas, and both of them found themselves outside before they had recovered from their astonishment.

"De Mouy!" exclaimed Coconnas.

"Henri!" murmured La Mole.

"De Mouy in your hat and cloak, and imitating the swing of your arm."

"Yes, but . . . since it is no question of love, it certainly means some plot."

"Ah! 'Sdeath! so now we are involved in politics," grumbled Coconnas: "happily, I don't see that Madame de Nevers has any connection with this affair."

Marguerite returned and sat down near the King and De Mouy; her absence had lasted but a minute and she had employed the time well. The fact that Gillonne was on guard at the secret passage, while the two gentlemen were posted at the chief entrance, afforded her a sense of safety.

"Madame," said Henri, "do you think it is possible for our conversation to be overheard by any means whatever?"

"Monsieur," said Marguerite, "the walls of the room are padded, and a double panelling guarantees that no sound can penetrate."

"I trust to you," replied Henri, with a smile.

Then, turning to De Mouy:—

"Now, what are you doing here?" said the King, in a low tone, as if spite of Marguerite's assurance, his fears were not entirely removed.

"Here?" said De Mouy.

"Yes, here, in this room," repeated Henri.

"He did not come for anything," said Marguerite, "it was I who brought him in."

"Then you had . . .?"

"I have guessed all."

"You see, De Mouy, she can divine."

"Monsieur De Mouy," continued Marguerite, "was with Duc François this morning, in the chamber of two of his gentlemen."

"You see, De Mouy, that everything is known," repeated Henri.

"It is true," said De Mouy.

"I was sure," said Henri, "that the Duc d'Alençon had got hold of you."

"It is your own fault, sire. Why did you so persistently decline the offer which I came to make to you?"

"You declined!" cried Marguerite. "Your refusal, of which I had a presentiment, was an actual fact then?"

"Madame," said Henri, shaking his head, "and you, my brave De Mouy, you really make me laugh with your exclamations. What! a man comes to see me, speaks to me of a throne, a revolt, an upheaval, to me, to me, Henri, a prince tolerated so long as I adopt a humble demeanour, a Huguenot whose life is spared on condition that I play the Catholic—and you expect me to accept these proposals when they are made in a room that is not padded and has no double panelling! Zounds! you are children or fools!"

"But, sire, could not your Majesty leave me some hope, if not in words, at least by a sign, a gesture?"

"What did my brother-in-law say to you, De Mouy?"

"Sire, that is not my own secret."

"Zounds!" replied Henri, with a certain impatience at having to deal with a man who was so slow at understanding him, "I am not asking you what proposals he made; I am only asking you if he listened and understood."

"He listened, Sire, and understood."

"He listened, and understood! You admit it yourself, De Mouy, poor sort of a conspirator that you are! had I uttered but one word in reply, you were lost. For though I was not sure, yet I suspected that he might be listening, or if not he, then some other, the Duc d'Anjou, Charles IX., or the Queen-Mother; you do not know the walls of the Louvre, De Mouy; it is for them that the proverb, 'walls have ears,' was invented; and knowing these walls as I do, I ought to have spoken, forsooth! Come, come, De Mouy, you credit the King of Navarre with but little sense, and I am only surprised that, not ranking him more highly in your estimation, you should have come to offer him a crown."

"But, Sire," urged De Mouy once more, "could you not, while still refusing the crown, have given me a sign? I

should not then have considered that all was lost and our cause hopeless."

"Sdeath!" cried Henri, "whoever was listening could have seen as well, and cannot a sign compass a man's ruin as well as a word! why, see here, De Mouy," continued the King, glancing round him, "though I am so close to you that my words do not pass beyond the circle made by our three chairs, I still fear lest I should be overheard when I say: 'De Mouy, repeat your proposals to me.'"

"But, Sire," cried De Mouy, in despair, "I am now pledged to the Duc d'Alençon."

Marguerite struck her fair hands together with vexation.

"Then it is too late?" she said.

"On the contrary," murmured Henri, "let us recognise even in this the protecting hand of God. Remain pledged to him, De Mouy, for in the Duc François lies our whole safety. Do you imagine that the King of Navarre could guarantee the safety of your heads? on the contrary, unhappy man! I should be the cause of your all being killed on the smallest suspicion. But a Son of France is quite a different matter; get proofs, De Mouy; demand guarantees; but, simpleton that you are, you have pledged yourself merely on the strength of his bare word."

"Oh! Sire! believe me, it was despair owing to your desertion of us that drove me into the arms of the Duke, as well as the fear of being betrayed, since he possessed our secret."

"Get possession of *his* secret, De Mouy, in your turn; that depends on yourself. What does he desire? To be King of Navarre? Promise him the crown. What does he want to do? To quit the Court? Furnish him with the means of escape; work for him, De Mouy, as though you were working for me; hold the shield in such a way that he may parry all the blows directed at ourselves. When he is forced to flee, we will both flee; when it is a question of fighting and reigning, I will reign alone."

"Distrust the Duke," said Marguerite, "his is a reserved and penetrating disposition, incapable of hatred as he is of friendship; ever ready to treat his friends as foes, and his foes as friends."

"And he is expecting you, De Mouy?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Where?"

"In the chamber belonging to his two gentlemen."

"At what hour?"

"Up till midnight."

"It is not eleven yet," said Henri; "come, De Mouy, no time has been lost."

"We have your word, sir," said Marguerite.

"Come, Madame," said Henri, with that confidence which he knew so well how to display towards certain persons, and in certain circumstances, "in the case of M. de Mouy such guarantees are not required."

"You are right, Sire," answered the young man, "but I require *your* word, since I shall have to tell the chiefs of the Party that you have given it me. You are not really a Catholic, are you?"

Henri shrugged his shoulders.

"You do not renounce the sovereignty of Navarre?"

"I renounce no sovereignty, De Mouy, only, I reserve to myself the choice of the higher sovereignty, the one, that is to say, that shall be most expedient for myself and for you."

"And if, meanwhile, your Majesty should be arrested, you promise to reveal nothing, even in case your royal Majesty should be subjected to torture?"

"De Mouy, I swear it by God."

"One word more, Sire; how shall I see you again?"

"You shall have a key of my chamber to-morrow; you shall come in, De Mouy, as often as is necessary, and at what hour you please. It will be the business of the Duc d'Alençon to answer for your presence in the Louvre. Meanwhile, go up by the small staircase; I will act as your guide. While I am doing so, the Queen will admit the man with the red cloak, like your own, who was in the ante-chamber just now. No one must know that there is any difference between the two, and that you are two separate persons, must they, De Mouy? Must they, Madame?"

Henri pronounced these last words with a laugh and a glance at Marguerite.

"No," said she, without betraying any emotion; "for this Monsieur de La Mole is in the service of the Duke my brother."

"Well, Madame, try to gain him over to our side," said Henri, with well-assumed gravity; "spare neither gold nor promises.

I place my whole wealth at his disposal."

"In that case," said Marguerite, with one of those smiles characteristic only of the heroines of Boccaccio, "since such is your wish, I will do my best to further it."

"Good, Madame; and you, De Mouy, go back to the Duke and run your sword through him."

CHAPTER XXVI

MARGARITA

WHILE the above conversation was taking place, La Mole and Coconnas continued to mount guard; La Mole somewhat annoyed, Coconnas a little uneasy.

La Mole had had time to reflect, and Coconnas had greatly assisted him in so doing.

"What think you of all this, my friend?" La Mole had asked Coconnas.

"I think," the Piedmontese had replied, "that some Court intrigue is at the bottom of it all."

"And, such being the case, are you disposed to play a part in that intrigue?"

"My dear friend," answered Coconnas, "listen attentively to what I am about to say, and try to profit by it. In all these plots of princes, in all these machinations of kings, we can only—we must only—be considered as shadows; where the King of Navarre leaves behind a bit of his plume, or the Duc d'Alençon a flap of his cloak, *we* must leave our lives. The Queen has a fancy for you, and you a liking for her—nothing more. Lose your head in love, my dear fellow, but don't lose it by meddling with politics."

It was sound advice. Accordingly, it was listened to by La Mole with all the sadness of a man who feels that, placed between reason and folly, he must follow the latter.

"I have not a mere liking for the Queen, Hannibal; I am in love with her; and, fortunately or otherwise, I love her with my whole soul. It is folly, you will tell me. I admit it; I am mad. But you, who are a wise man, Coconnas, ought not to suffer through my folly and my misfortune. Go, therefore, and find

our master, and do not compromise yourself."

Coconnas reflected for a moment; then, raising his head, he replied:

"My dear fellow, all that you say is perfectly true; you are in love, so act accordingly. For my own part, I am ambitious, and that being my disposition, I reckon life of greater value than a woman's kisses. When I risk my life, I shall make my own conditions, and you, poor lover, must try and do the same."

Whereupon Coconnas gave La Mole his hand, and went away, after exchanging a last look and a last smile with his comrade.

It was about ten minutes after he had quitted his post when the door opened, and Marguerite, appearing cautiously, came and took La Mole by the hand, and without saying a word, drew him from the corridor into the innermost recesses of her apartment, with her own hands closing the door with a caution which betokened the importance of the conference that was about to take place.

Having reached the chamber, she stopped, sat down on the ebony chair, and drawing La Mole towards her, took both his hands in her own and began:

"Now that we are alone, my dear friend, let us talk seriously."

"Seriously, Madame?"

"Or amorously. See, that suits you better, does it not? There are perhaps serious things in love, especially in the love of a queen."

"Let us talk, then . . . of serious things, but on condition that your Majesty will not be angry at the foolish things I may say to you."

"I shall only be angry at one thing, La Mole, and that is at your calling me 'Madame,' or 'your Majesty.' For you, dear, I am only Marguerite."

"Yes, Marguerite — Margarita — my pearl!" said the young man, devouring the Queen with his gaze.

"That is better," said Marguerite; "so you are jealous, are you?"

"Yes; enough to drive me out of my senses."

"Still! . . ."

"Enough to send me mad, Marguerite."

"Jealous of whom, come?"

"Of everybody."

"But in particular?"

"Of the King, in the first place."

"I thought that after what you have

seen and heard you might be easy on that score."

"Of De Mouy, whom I saw this morning for the first time, and whom I find this evening so advanced in his intimacy with you."

"Of M. de Mouy?"

"Yes."

"And what has filled you with this suspicion of M. de Mouy?"

"Listen . . . I recognised him by his figure, by the colour of his hair, by an instinctive feeling of dislike—it is he who was with the Duc d'Alençon this morning."

"Well, how does that affect me?"

"M. de Alençon is your brother; he is said to love you dearly; you must have hinted to him a vague desire of your heart, and he, according to the custom of the Court, has favoured your desire by introducing De Mouy to your presence. Now, how arose the circumstance, so lucky for me, that the King should find himself there at the same time as De Mouy? That is what I do not know; but in any case, Madame, be frank with me; in default of any other sentiment, a love like mine has every right to claim frankness in return. See, I prostrate myself at your feet. If what you have evinced for me is but a momentary caprice, I give you back your word, your promise, your love; I restore to M. d'Alençon the favour he has shown me and my office of gentleman, and I will go and get killed at the siege of La Rochelle, unless I die of a broken heart before I arrive there."

Marguerite listened with a smile to these words so full of charm, and followed with her eyes his gestures so full of gracefulness; then, resting her beautiful head thoughtfully on her burning hand:

"You love me?" she said.

"Oh! Madame, more than my life; more than my salvation; more than everything! but you . . . you do love me."

"Poor infatuate fool!" she murmured.

"Yes, Madam," cried La Mole, still kneeling at her feet, "I told you I was that."

"The chiefest thing in your life, then, is your love, dear La Mole?"

"It is the one and only thing, Madame."

"Well, be it so; I will make all the rest only an accessory to that love. You love me, you wish to stay near me?"

"My one prayer to God is that He may never send me from your side."

"Well, you shall not leave me; I want you, La Mole."

"You want me? the sun needs the glow-worm?"

"If I tell you that I love you, will you be absolutely devoted to me?"

"Why, am I not so already, Madame, entirely devoted to you?"

"Yes, but you still mistrust me."

"Oh! I was wrong; I am ungrateful, or rather—as I told you, and you repeated it—I am mad. But why was De Mouy with you this evening? Why did I see him this morning with M. d'Alençon? Why that red cloak, that white plume, that imitation of my appearance. . . . Ah! Madame, it is not you whom I suspect, but your brother."

"Unhappy man!" said Marguerite, "to believe that my brother pushes his compliance to the point of introducing a lover to his sister! Senseless man, who says he is jealous, and yet has not guessed the truth! Do you know, La Mole, that the Duc d'Alençon would slay you with his own sword if he knew that you were here this evening at my knees, and that, instead of spurning you from that position, I am saying to you: Stay where you are, La Mole, for I love you, do you hear, I love you! Well, yes, I repeat, he would kill you."

"Great God! is it possible?" cried La Mole, falling backwards and looking at Marguerite in terror.

"Everything is possible, my friend, in our days and at this Court. Now, but one word: it was not on account of me that De Mouy, dressed in your cloak and his face concealed beneath your hat, came to the Louvre. It was for M. d'Alençon. I brought him in here, thinking that he was you. He is in possession of our secret, La Mole, we must treat him gently."

"I should prefer to kill him," said La Mole, "it is the shortest and safest way."

"And I," said the Queen, "prefer that he should live and that you should know all, for his life is not only useful to us, but necessary. Listen, and weigh well your words before replying: do you love me sufficiently, La Mole, to rejoice if I became veritably Queen, that is to say, mistress of an actual kingdom?"

"Alas! Madame, I love you well enough to desire what you desire, were

the realisation of that desire to render my whole life unhappy."

"Well, will you help me to realise that desire, which shall render you still more happy?"

"Oh! Madame, I shall lose you!" cried La Mole, burying his face in his hands.

"No, on the contrary; instead of being the first of my servants, you shall become the chief of my subjects; that is all the difference."

"Oh! it is not interest . . . nor ambition, Madame, . . . do not degrade the feeling which I have for you . . . it is devotion, nothing but devotion."

"You have a noble nature," said Marguerite; "well, yes, I accept your devotion and shall know how to repay it."

And she held out both her hands, which La Mole covered with kisses.

"Well!" she said.

"Well, yes," answered La Mole. "Yes, Marguerite, I now begin to understand that vague project which was discussed among us Huguenots before St. Bartholomew's Day, the project for the execution of which I, like so many others worthier than myself, had been summoned to Paris. You covet that actual sovereignty of Navarre which is to replace the fictitious one; King Henri is urging you to this; De Mouy is conspiring with you, is he not? But the Duc d'Alençon, what has he to do with all this? Where is there a throne for him in this enterprise? I cannot see any. Well, the Duc d'Alençon is sufficiently your . . . friend to aid you in all this, without making any claim in exchange for the danger which he incurs?"

"The Duke, my friend, is conspiring on his own behalf. Let us leave him in his error, his life ensures the safety of our lives."

"But I, who am in his service, can I betray him?"

"Betray him? and how shall you be betraying him? What has he confided to you? Is it not rather he who has betrayed you by giving De Mouy your hat and cloak as a means of gaining admission to his presence? You belong to him, say you! Were you not mine before you were his? Has he given you a greater proof of friendship than the proof of my love which I have afforded you?"

La Mole rose pale and as though thunderstruck.

"Oh!" he murmured, "Cocconnas was quite right; intrigue is enveloping me in its folds—it will choke me."

"Well?" asked Marguerite.

"Well," said La Mole, "here is my answer: It is asserted, and I have heard it said in the most remote part of France, where your illustrious name and your universal reputation for beauty had reached me and filled my heart with a vague longing for the unknown—it is asserted, I say, that you have loved ere now, and that your love has always proved fatal to those who were the objects of that love, so much so that death, no doubt through jealousy, has almost always relieved you of your lovers."

"La Mole!"

"Do not interrupt me, dearest Marguerite, for they also add that you preserve in gold caskets the hearts of your faithful friends, and sometimes bestow on these sad relics a pious glance and melancholy remembrance.* You sigh, my Queen, and lower your eyes; it is true, then. Well! make of me the most beloved and the happiest of your favoured ones. Of others you have pierced the hearts, and you preserve those hearts; with me you do more, you expose my head . . . Well! Marguerite, swear to me before the image of that God who saved my life, swear to me that if I die for you—as I have a gloomy presentiment that I shall—swear to me that you will keep, and sometimes press to your lips, that head which the executioner shall sever from my body; swear, Marguerite, and the promise of such a recompense, made by my Queen, will make me dumb—will make me even a traitor and a coward at need—that is to say, absolutely devoted, as your lover and your accomplice ought to be."

"Let no such gloomy folly fill your thoughts, my love!" said Marguerite.

"Swear. . . ."

"Must I do so?"

"Yes, swear on this silver casket surmounted by a cross."

"Well!" said Marguerite, "if your presentiments are realised, which God forbid, then on this cross I swear that you shall be near me, living or dead, so long as I myself have life; and should I be unable

to save you in the peril you are incurring for me—for my sake alone, as I know—I will at least give to your poor soul the consolation which you ask, and which you will so richly have deserved."

"One word more, Marguerite. I can die now, since you have reassured me in respect to my death; but, on the other hand, I may live, we may be successful; the King of Navarre may reign, and you may be Queen; then the King will carry you away; the vow of separation between you will be broken one day, and that will part you from me. Come, Marguerite, my dearly beloved, you have with a word reassured me in regard to my death; now reassure me with another word as regards my life."

"Oh! fear nothing, I am yours body and soul," cried Marguerite, laying her hand once more on the cross upon the little casket. "If I go, you shall follow me; and if the King refuses to take you, then I will not go."

"But you will not venture to withstand him!"

"My dear Hyacinthe," said Marguerite, "you do not know Henri: Henri at this moment thinks of but one thing, namely, of being King; to that desire he would sacrifice at this moment all that he possesses, and, by still better reason, what he does not possess. Farewell."

"Do you dismiss me, Madame?" said La Mole, smiling.

"It is late," said Marguerite.

"No doubt; but where would you have me go? M. de Mouy is in my room with the Duc d'Alençon."

"Ah! true," said Marguerite, with a charming smile. "Besides, I have several things to say to you in connection with our scheme."

From this night onwards La Mole was no mere ordinary favourite, and could carry proudly that head of his for which, alive or dead, such a sweet future was in store.

At times, however, his brow was bent towards the ground, his cheeks grew pale, and anxious meditation traced its furrows between the eyebrows of this young man, once so merry, now so happy!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HAND OF GOD

ON leaving Madame de Sauve, Henri had said to her:

"Go to bed, Charlotte, and pretend to

* She wore an enormous farthingale, with pockets all round, in each of which she placed a gold box containing the heart of one of her dead lovers; for, as they died, she saw to having their hearts embalmed. This farthingale was suspended every evening from a hook, secured by a padlock, behind the head of her bed.—Tallemant des Réaux, *Histoire de Marguerite de Valois*.

be seriously ill, and on no account admit anyone during the whole of to-morrow."

Charlotte obeyed without making any question of the King's motive in giving her these directions: she was growing accustomed to his eccentricities, as we should term them nowadays—his whims, as they were then styled.

She knew, besides, that there were locked in his breast secrets which he disclosed to nobody, that his thoughts were full of projects which he feared he might reveal even in his dreams; accordingly she took care to comply with all his wishes, in the certainty that even the strangest of his ideas were directed towards a purpose.

The same evening, therefore, she complained to Dariole of a severe headache, accompanied by giddiness; these being the symptoms which Henri had told her to feign. On the following day she pretended to want to get up; but hardly had she set her foot to the ground ere she complained of feeling weak generally, and went to bed again.

This illness, already announced by Henri to the Duc d'Alençon, was the first piece of news given to Catherine upon her asking in an easy manner why Madame de Sauve did not come as usual to dress her.

"She is ill," answered Madame de Lorraine, who was in the room.

"Ill!" repeated Catherine, without a muscle of her face betraying her interest in the reply. "Some fit of laziness, more likely."

"No, Madame," replied the Princess; "she complains of violent headache and a weakness which prevents her from walking."

Catherine did not answer; but, to hide her delight, no doubt, turned towards the window, and seeing Henri crossing the courtyard after his conversation with De Mouy, she got up in order to observe him more closely, and prompted by those stings of conscience which are ever felt, though invisibly, in the hearts most hardened to crime:

"Does not my son Henri," she asked the captain of the guards, "look paler than usual this morning?"

It was not so in reality; Henri, although uneasy in his mind, was perfectly well in body.

The persons who usually assisted at the Queen's toilet withdrew one by one; three or four of her more familiar atten-

dants still remained; Catherine, in her impatience, dismissed them, saying that she wished to be alone.

When the last of the courtiers had gone out, Catherine closed the door behind him, and going to a secret cupboard concealed behind one of the panels of her chamber, slid back the door in a groove of the woodwork and took out a book, the crumpled leaves of which denoted the frequency of its use. She placed the book on a table, opened it at a page indicated by a book-marker, rested her elbow on the table and her head upon her hand.

"Yes, that is it," she murmured, as she read; "headache, general weakness, pains in the eyes, swelling of the palate. Only the headache and the weakness have been mentioned as yet . . . the other symptoms will not be long in showing themselves."

She continued:

"Next inflammation seizes the throat, extends to the stomach, envelopes the heart as with a circle of flame, and splits the brain like a thunderbolt."

She read this in a low voice; then she went on again, but in still more subdued tones:

"For the fever six hours, for the general inflammation twelve hours, for the mortification twelve hours, for the death agony six hours; thirty-six hours in all."

"Now, supposing that the process of absorption takes place more slowly than that of deglutition, and that instead of thirty-six hours we have forty, or even eight-and-forty; yes, forty-eight hours ought to be enough. But how is it that Henri is still up and about? Because he is a man, and of a robust constitution, or perhaps he drank something after embracing her, and wiped his lips after drinking."

Catherine awaited the dinner-hour with impatience. Henri dined every day at the King's table. When he came, he complained in his turn of spasmodic twitchings in the head, ate nothing, and retired immediately after the meal, saying that as he had lain awake during the greater part of the night, he felt an urgent desire for sleep.

Catherine listened as he retreated with tottering footsteps, and had him followed. The report was brought back that the King of Navarre had gone in the direction of Madame de Sauve's apartment.

"Henri," she said to herself, "by going to her this evening will complete the work of death which an unfortunate accident has perhaps left unfinished"

In point of fact, the King of Navarre had gone to Madame de Sauve, but only to tell her to continue to play her part.

The next day Henri did not leave his room the whole morning, nor did he put in an appearance at dinner with the King. Madame de Sauve was reported to be growing worse, and the report of Henri's illness, circulated by Catherine herself, spread like one of those presentiments, the origin of which no man can account for, but which are disseminated insensibly through the air.

Catherine applauded herself for the course which she had taken; she had sent away Ambroise Paré for the whole night to go and visit one of her favourite attendants at Saint-Germain. She must have a man, therefore, whom she could summon to Madame de Sauve and Henri; and this man would say only what she wished him to say. If, contrary to all expectation, any other doctor found himself mixed up in the business, and if any assertion of poisoning were to alarm that Court where so many similar assertions had already been whispered, she reckoned confidently upon the rumours which were prevalent of Marguerite's jealousy on account of her husband's intrigues. The reader will recollect that the Queen-Mother had spoken often of this jealousy, which had blazed forth on several occasions, amongst others during the expedition of the Court to visit the miraculous Hawthorn, where she had said to her daughter, in the presence of several persons:

"Then you are very jealous, Marguerite?"

Accordingly, she waited with a composed countenance the moment when the door should open and some servant should enter, with pale and scared face, exclaiming:

"Your Majesty, Madame de Sauve is dead, and the King of Navarre is dying!"

Four o'clock struck. Catherine was in the aviary crumbling biscuits for some rare birds which she fed with her own hand. Though her face was, as usual, calm and even gloomy, her heart beat violently at the slightest sound.

Suddenly the door opened.

"Madame," said the captain of the guard, "the King of Navarre is . . ."

"Ill?" interrupted Catherine eagerly.

"No, Madame, thank God! his Majesty appears extremely well."

"What were you going to say, then?"

"That the King of Navarre is here."

"What does he want with me?"

"He has brought your Majesty a small monkey, a very rare specimen."

At this moment Henri entered with a basket in his hand, caressing a little chimpanzee monkey, which lay inside it.

Henri smiled as he entered, his attention apparently being quite taken up with the charming little creature which he was bringing; but for all his seeming preoccupation, he was able to bestow that first scrutinising glance which sufficed for him in difficult circumstances. As for Catherine, she was very pale, and her paleness increased in proportion as she observed the healthy rosiness in the cheeks of the young King.

The Queen-Mother was dazed by this blow. She accepted Henri's present mechanically, became confused, complimented him on his appearance, and added:

"I am the more pleased to see you looking so well, my son, because I had heard that you were ill, and because, if I recollect rightly, you complained in my presence of indisposition; but I see now," added she, with an attempt at a smile, "that it was merely an excuse to gain your freedom."

"As a matter of fact, Madame, I was very ill," answered Henri, "but a remedy which they use in our mountains and which was given me by my mother, has cured me."

"You will give me the recipe, won't you, Henri?" said Catherine, this time with a genuine smile, the irony of which, however, she could not conceal.

"Some antidote," she muttered; "we must see about this. Or rather, no; seeing Madame de Sauve ill, he has suspected. Verily, it makes one believe that the protecting hand of God is extended over this man."

Catherine awaited the night with impatience. Madame de Sauve did not appear. When at cards, she inquired about her and was told that she was suffering increased pain.

During the whole evening Catherine was restless, and people anxiously asked themselves what troubled thoughts could be agitating that usually impassive countenance.

Presently the company withdrew. Catherine's ladies undressed her and assisted her to bed; but, as soon as all was quiet in the Louvre, she got up again, wrapped herself in a long black dressing-gown, took up a lamp, selected

from a number of keys the one which opened Madame de Sauve's door, and went upstairs to visit her maid-of-honour.

Had Henri anticipated this visit? was he occupied in his own room? was he concealed anywhere? was the young woman alone?—such were the questions which agitated her mind.

Catherine opened the door cautiously, crossed the ante-chamber, entered the drawing-room, put down her lamp, for a light was burning near the patient, and glided like a ghost into the bedroom.

The bed was entirely closed in by curtains. Dariole was fast asleep in a large chair near the bed.

The breathing of the patient was so light that for a moment Catherine believed that it had ceased.

Presently, however, she heard a faint breath, and went, with a malignant delight, to raise the curtain in order to judge for herself of the effects of the terrible poison, shuddering in anticipation at the livid pallor or the ravaging purple of deadly fever which she expected to see; but, instead of any such sight, the young woman—her eyes gently closed under their white lids, her mouth rosy and half opened, her moist cheek resting on one of her gracefully rounded arms, while the other, fresh and pearly, lay along the counterpane of crimson damask—was peacefully sleeping with a smile upon her lips, the product, doubtless, of some pleasant dream, while her cheeks were flushed with the colour that denotes an untroubled good health.

Catherine could not restrain an exclamation of surprise which partially awoke Dariole.

The Queen-Mother drew back behind the bed curtains.

Dariole opened her eyes; but, overcome by slumber, the girl let her heavy lids droop and fell asleep again without even attempting to discover the cause that had awakened her.

Catherine now emerged from behind the curtain, and directing her glance to the other parts of the room, saw on a small table a flagon of Spanish wine, fruit, sugared pastry, and a couple of glasses. It was clear that Henri had supped with the Baronne, who evidently was just as well as he was.

Catherine stepped at once to the dressing-table and took from it the little silver box, now one-third empty. It was

exactly the same, or at any rate very closely resembled the one which she had sent to Charlotte. With the end of a golden needle she took out of it some paste about the size of a pearl, and returning to her own apartments gave it to the little monkey with which Henri had presented her that very evening. The animal, enticed by the fragrant odour, devoured it greedily, and curling itself round in its basket, went to sleep again.

Catherine waited for a quarter of an hour.

"The half of what it has just eaten," said Catherine "killed my dog Brutus in one minute. I have been tricked: is it René? René! impossible: then it must be Henri! Oh! fatality! It is clear: he cannot die, since he is destined to reign. Perhaps, however, it is only that the poison has lost its strength. We will make trial of the sword, and see what happens."

And Catherine went to bed evolving in her mind a new idea, which doubtless reached maturity on the next day; for, on the following morning, she called her captain of the guard and handed him a letter, bidding him carry it to its address and give it into no other hands than his whose name it bore.

The letter was addressed to Sire de Louviers de Maurevel, Captain of the King's Petardiers, Rue de la Cerisaie, near the Arsenal.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LETTER FROM ROME

SOME days had elapsed since the events that have just been related, when one morning a litter escorted by several gentlemen wearing the livery of M. de Guise entered the Louvre, and a message was brought to the Queen of Navarre that the Duchesse de Nevers requested the honour of paying her court to her.

Marguerite was at this moment receiving a visit from Madame de Sauve. It was the first time that the Baronne had been out since her pretended illness. She had heard that the Queen had expressed to her husband great anxiety in regard to this illness, which for a week had formed the chief topic of conversation at Court, and came to thank her for her inquiries.

Marguerite congratulated her on her convalescence, and on her good fortune

in having escaped from the sudden attack of that strange malady the gravity of which she, in her capacity as a Daughter of France, could not fail to appreciate.

"You will come, I hope," said Marguerite, "to that great hunt which has already been postponed once, and which is definitely expected to take place to-morrow. The weather is mild for the winter season; the sun has softened the ground, and all our sportsmen declare it will be a most favourable day for the chase."

"But, Madame," said the Baronne, "I hardly know whether I am sufficiently recovered."

"Oh! nonsense," replied Marguerite; "you must make an effort; besides, I have authorised the King, as I shall take part in the chase, to dispose of a little Béarnais horse which I was to have ridden, and which will carry you beautifully. Haven't you heard it mentioned?"

"Yes, Madame, but I was ignorant that this little horse had been destined to have the honour of being offered to your Majesty, or I should not have accepted it."

"Through pride, Baronne?"

"No, Madame, quite the contrary, through humility."

"You will come, then?"

"Your Majesty overwhelms me with honour; I will come, since it is your command."

At this moment the Duchesse de Nevers was announced. On hearing her name Marguerite showed such signs of delight that the Baronne gathered that the two ladies had something which they wished to discuss together, and rose to take her leave.

"I shall see you to-morrow, then," said Marguerite.

"To-morrow, Madame."

"By the bye, Baronne," continued Marguerite, as she waved her hand in sign of dismissal, "you know that in public I detest you, inasmuch as I am horribly jealous."

"But in private?" asked Madame de Sauve.

"Oh! in private, I not only forgive you, but am even grateful to you."

"Then, your Majesty will allow me . . ."

Marguerite extended her hand, the Baronne kissed it with respect, made a deep reverence, and retired.

While Madame de Sauve ascended her staircase, springing like a goat that has broken its fastening, Madame de Nevers and the Queen exchanged some

ceremonious greetings, which gave the gentlemen who had accompanied the Duchess time to withdraw.

"Gillonne," cried Marguerite, as soon as the door had closed behind the last of them, "see that no one interrupts us."

"Yes," said the Duchess, "for we have very serious matters to discuss."

And taking a chair, she sat down without ceremony, taking the best place near the fire and the sun, in the certainty that nobody would come to disturb the relations of intimacy agreed upon between the Queen of Navarre and herself.

"Well," said Marguerite with a smile, "what are you doing with our famous swordsman?"

"My dear Queen," said the Duchess, "he is a perfect demigod, upon my soul. His wit is incomparable, and he never grows stale; his jokes would make a hermit in his cell die with laughter. All the same, he is the most atrocious heathen that ever was sewn up in the skin of a Catholic; I simply adore the man. And you, what are you doing with your Apollo?"

"Alas!" said Marguerite, with a sigh.

"Oh! that 'alas!' frightens me, dear Queen! Is the dear La Mole too respectful, then, or is he too sentimental? His friend Coconnas is neither of these, I am obliged to admit."

"Why, no, he has his moments," said Marguerite, "and that 'alas!' applies to myself alone."

"What does it mean, then?"

"It means, dear Duchess, that I am greatly afraid of loving him for good and all."

"Really?"

"On the word of Marguerite."

"Oh! so much the better; what a happy life we shall lead, then," cried Henriette; "to be a little in love, was my dream; to love deeply, was yours. It is so sweet, dear and learned Queen, to rest one's mind with a little love-making. Ah! Marguerite, I have a presentiment that we are going to spend a pleasant year."

"You think so?" said the Queen; "I, on the contrary, I know not why, see things as it were through a veil: all these questions of politics preoccupy me dreadfully. By the bye, find out whether your Hannibal is as devoted to my brother as he appears to be. Ask about that, it is important."

"He, devoted to anyone or anything! it is clear that you do not know him as I

do. If he is ever devoted to anything, it is to his ambition, nothing else. Is your brother a man to make him large promises, if so, well and good; he will be devoted to your brother; but let your brother—Son of France though he be—take care not to fail to keep any promises he may have made to him, otherwise, woe betide your brother!”

“Really?”

“It is as I tell you. In truth, Marguerite, there are moments when this tiger that I have tamed frightens even me. The other day I said to him:—‘Hannibal, take care you don’t deceive me, for if you did! . . .’ I said it, too, with those emerald eyes of mine of which Ronsard wrote:—

*La duchesse de Nevers
Aux yeux verts
Qui, sous leur paupière blonde,
Lancent sur nous plus d’éclairs
Que ne font vingt Jupiters
Dans les airs,
Lorsque la tempête gronde.**

“Well?”

“Well! I thought he was going to answer:—I deceive you! never, etc., etc. . . . Do you know what he did reply?”

“No.”

“Well! you may judge of the man from this:—

‘And you, too,’ he answered, ‘take care you don’t deceive me; for, princess though you are . . .’ And, as he said it, he threatened me, not merely with his eyes, but with his pointed finger, which was furnished with a nail cut like the head of a spear, and which he almost thrust into my nose. I confess to you that his face was so alarming at that moment that I started, though, as you know, I am not a coward.”

“He dared to threaten you, Henriette?”

“Zounds! but I threatened him well too. After all, he is right. So you see, he is devoted up to a certain point, or rather, up to a certain point he is very uncertain.”

“We shall see then,” said Marguerite absently, “I will speak to La Mole. Had you anything else to tell me?”

“Yes; a most interesting thing, and which I came on purpose to tell you, but, you see, you had even more interesting things to tell me. I have had news.”

“From Rome?”

“Yes, a messenger has come from my husband.”

*More deadly shafts flash from her emerald eyes
Than twenty Joves shoot from tempestuous skies.

“Well! what about the Polish business?”

“It is going on capitally, and in a few days you will probably be rid of your brother of Anjou.”

“Has the Pope confirmed his election, then?”

“Yes, dear.”

“And you didn’t tell me!” cried Marguerite; “come, the details, quick, quick!”

“Oh! I don’t know anything more, upon my word, than what I have told you: but wait, I will show you my husband’s letter; here it is. Oh! no, those are some verses of Hannibal’s, shocking verses, my dear Marguerite; he never writes any decent ones. Oh! here it is—no, not yet, that is a note of my own which I want you to get La Mole to deliver. Ah! this is it, at last.”

And Madame de Nevers handed the letter to the Queen. Marguerite opened it eagerly and glanced through it, but practically it told her nothing more than she had already learned from the lips of her friend.

“And how did this letter reach you,” continued the Queen.

“By a messenger from my husband, who had orders to call at the Hôtel de Guise before going to the Louvre and to hand me this letter before he delivered the King’s. I knew the importance which you, my Queen, attached to this news, and I had written to M. de Nevers to tell him to do this. He, you see, obeyed me; he is not like that monster Coconnas. At the present moment not a soul in Paris knows this news except the King and you and me: unless the man who followed our messenger . . .”

“What man?”

“It’s a dreadful employment! Just fancy, this unfortunate messenger arrived exhausted and travel stained; he has ridden day and night for a week, without a moment’s rest.”

“But this man of whom you were speaking just now?”

“Wait a moment. Constantly pursued by a man of fierce appearance who had relays of horses like himself and travelled the four hundred leagues as quickly as he himself did, this unfortunate courier was momentarily expecting a pistol-shot in his back. Both arrived at the Barrière de Saint-Marcel at the very same moment, both galloped at full speed down the Rue Mouffetard and across the Cité. But at

the end of the Pont Notre-Dame our messenger turned to the right, while the other turned to the left by the Place du Châtelet and darted like a bolt from a cross-bow along the Quays in the direction of the Louvre."

"Thanks, my good Henriette, thanks," exclaimed Marguerite: "you are right, this is most interesting news. Whom was the other messenger for? Well! I shall find out. Leave me now. This evening, in the Rue Tizon, is it not? and to-morrow at the hunt; and above all remember to take a very unmanageable horse so that he may run away with you and that we may be by ourselves. I will tell you this evening what you must try to find out from your Coconnas."

"You won't forget to deliver my letter?" said the Duchesse de Nevers.

"No, no, make your mind easy, he shall have it and in time too."

Madame de Nevers went out and Marguerite immediately sent for Henri, who quickly obeyed her summons, whereupon she handed him the letter from the Duc de Nevers.

"Oh!" said he.

Marguerite then told him the incident of the two couriers.

"In fact," said Henri, "I saw him enter the Louvre."

"Perhaps he was for the Queen-Mother?"

"No; I am sure of it, for I stationed myself in the corridor, and I didn't see anyone pass."

"In that case," said Marguerite, looking at her husband, "it must be . . ."

"For your brother, D'Alençon?" said Henri.

"Yes, but how are we to find out?"

"Could we not," asked Henri, carelessly, "send for one of those two gentlemen, and find out through him . . ."

"You are right, Sire!" said Marguerite, put at her ease by her husband's proposal, "I will send for M. de La Mole . . . Gillonne! Gillonne!"

The girl appeared.

"I must speak to M. de La Mole this instant," said the Queen. "Try and find him and bring him here."

Gillonne went away. Henri seated himself at a table on which lay a German book, with engravings by Albert Dürer, which he began to examine with so great attention that, when La Mole appeared, he did not appear to hear him, and did not even raise his head.

The young man, for his part, seeing the King with Marguerite, stopped on the threshold, dumb with surprise and pale with uneasiness.

Marguerite stepped towards him.

"Monsieur de La Mole," she asked, "can you tell me who is on duty with M. d'Alençon to-day?"

"Coconnas, Madame," said La Mole.

"Try to find out from him if he has introduced to his master a man covered with mud, with the appearance of having ridden a long journey at full speed."

"Ah! Madame, I fear he will not tell me; he has become very taciturn these last few days."

"Really! But if you give him this note, I think you ought to ask for something in exchange."

"From the Duchess! . . . Oh! well, armed with this note, I will try."

"And add," said Marguerite, lowering her voice, "that this note will serve him as a safe-conduct this evening for entering the house that you know of."

"And what safe-conduct shall I have?" said La Mole, *sotto voce*.

"Give your name, that will be enough."

"Give me the note, Madame," said La Mole, trembling all over with love, "I will be answerable for everything."

And he went off.

"We shall know to-morrow if the Duc d'Alençon is posted in the Polish affair," said Marguerite, quietly, as she turned to her husband.

"That M. de La Mole is truly an excellent servant," said Henri, with his peculiar smile, "and . . . by the Mass! I will make his fortune."

CHAPTER XXIX

HARKAWAY!

WHEN next morning a glorious red sun—but, as is usual in the privileged days of winter, with no halo of dazzling rays—rose from behind the hills surrounding Paris, the courtyard of the Louvre had already for two hours presented a scene of animated movement.

A magnificent barb, slim-built, yet muscular, with slender legs like a stag's, on which the veins crossed and recrossed like net-work, pawing the ground, pricking its ears and dilating its nostrils, was awaiting Charles IX. in the

courtyard; but the steed was even less impatient than its master, who was delayed by Catharine, the latter having stopped him just as he was starting, in order to speak to him on, as she declared, a matter of importance.

Both were in the glass-roofed gallery, Catherine cold, pale, impassable as ever, Charles quivering with impatience, biting his nails and whipping his two favourite hounds, which were clothed in cuirasses of mail to prevent their being gored by the boar's tusks, and that they might face the terrible animal with impunity. A small shield bearing the arms of France was fastened to their chests, much in the same fashion as on the breasts of the pages, who often had occasion to envy the privileges of these fortunate pets.

"Pay attention to this, Charles," Catherine was saying. "Nobody except you and me yet knows of the approaching arrival of the Polish envoys, though the King of Navarre is certainly acting as if he knew of it. In spite of his abjuration—of which I have always been suspicious—he is in communication with the Huguenots. Have you noticed how often he has been going out lately? Again, he has money, he who was always short of it; he is buying horses and weapons, and on rainy days he exercises himself at fencing from morning till night."

"Good heavens! mother," said Charles, impatiently, "do you imagine that he means to kill me, or my brother of Anjou? If so, he will need a good many lessons yet, for yesterday, with my foil, I marked eleven button-holes on his doublet, though it actually has but six. And as for my brother of Anjou, you know that he fences even better than I do, or at least as well, so he declares at any rate."

"Will you listen, Charles," replied Catherine, "and not treat your mother's words so lightly. The ambassadors are about to arrive; well, you will see, once they reach Paris, Henri will do his utmost to engage their attention. He is cunning and insinuating; not to mention that his wife, who supports him—why, I know not—will chatter to them in Latin, Greek, Hungarian, and every other known or unknown language. I tell you, Charles—and you know that I am never wrong—I tell you something underhand is going on."

At this moment the hour sounded, and

Charles ceased to listen to his mother in order to count the strokes.

"Death of my life! seven o'clock!" he cried. "An hour to get there, that will be eight; an hour to reach the rendez-vous, and find the quarry; we shall not be able to begin the hunt till nine o'clock. Upon my word, mother, you are making me lose a good deal of time. Down, Risquetout! . . . death of my life! down, you rascal!"

And with a vigorous blow of his whip across the hound's loins, he drew from the poor animal, astonished at receiving a thrashing instead of a caress, a sharp howl of anguish.

"Charles," resumed Catherine, "in God's name listen to me, and do not leave thus to chance your own fortunes and those of France. Your thoughts are entirely taken up with the chase . . . well, well! you will have plenty of time for sport when you lose your employment as King."

"Come, come, mother!" said Charles, pale with impatience, "let us come to an understanding quickly, for I am boiling over; upon my word, there are days when I don't understand you."

And he tapped his boot with the stock of his whip.

Catherine deemed that the opportunity had arrived, and that she must not let it slip.

"My son," said she, "we have proof that De Mouy has returned to Paris. M. de Maurevel, whom you know well, has seen him. He can only be here to see the King of Navarre. That, I should hope, is enough to make him more suspected than ever."

"Come, you are after my poor Henriot again! You want me to have him killed, do you not?"

"Oh! no."

"Sent into exile, then? But don't you see that he becomes far more formidable in exile than he will ever be here, under our eyes, in the Louvre, where he can do nothing without our knowing it at once?"

"Yes, and therefore I don't want him exiled."

"What do you want, then? Speak quickly!"

"I want you to have him kept in confinement while the Polish envoys are here; at the Bastille, for instance."

"Not I, pardieu!" cried Charles. "We are going boar-hunting this morning, and Henri is one of my best men; the chase will be a dead failure without him."

'Sdeath! mother, you really think of nothing but how to thwart me."

"My dear son, I do not say this very morning; the envoys will not arrive till to-morrow or the day after. We will not arrest him until after the hunt, this evening . . . to-night . . ."

"That's another matter. Well, we will discuss it again, we will see; after the chase is over, perhaps. Good-bye! Hi, there, Risquetout! Why! you're not going to turn sulky too, eh?"

"Charles," said Catherine, seizing him by the arm, at the risk of the explosion which this fresh delay would cause, "I think it would be best to sign the warrant of arrest at once, even though it is not put into execution until to-night."

"What! go search for the seal for the parchment, write the order and sign it, when they are waiting for me to go a-hunting! Oh! go to the devil!"

"No, no, I am too fond of you to delay you; I have arranged it all beforehand; come in here to my room, see!"

And Catherine, as active as though she were but twenty, pushed open a door leading to her closet, and showed the King inkstand, pen, parchment, seal, and a lighted candle.

The King took the parchment and ran his eye over it hastily.

"Order, etc., to arrest our brother Henri de Navarre and take him to the Bastille."

"There, it is done!" said he, signing with one stroke of the pen. "Good-bye, mother"

And he rushed from the apartment, followed by his hounds, and delighted at having got rid of Catherine so easily.

Charles was awaited with impatience, and as everyone was acquainted with his punctuality in affairs connected with the chase, his delay caused much astonishment. Accordingly, the huntsmen greeted his appearance with huzzas, the whippers-in sounded a flourish on their horns, horses neighed and hounds barked. The excitement of this welcome brought the colour to his pale cheeks, his heart swelled within him, and for a brief moment Charles felt young and happy.

The King hardly took time to return the greeting of the brilliant assembly collected in the courtyard; he nodded to the Duc d'Alençon, waved his hand to his sister Marguerite, passed in front of Henri without appearing to see him, and sprang to his horse, which capered impatiently beneath him. After a little

curvetting, however, the barb realised what sort of a rider it had to deal with, and quieted down.

The horns again resounded, and the King started from the Louvre, followed by the Duc d'Alençon, the King of Navarre, Marguerite, Madame de Nevers, Madame de Sauve, Tavannes, and the chief nobles of the Court. Needless to say, La Mole and Coconnas were also of the party. As for the Duc d'Anjou, he had been for the last three months at the siege of La Rochelle.

While waiting for the King, Henri had come up to greet his wife, who, while returning the compliment, whispered in his ear:

"The courier from Rome was introduced by M. de Coconnas himself to the Duc d'Alençon a quarter of an hour before the messenger from the Duc de Nevers was admitted to the King."

"Then he knows everything," said Henri.

"Yes, he must know all," answered Marguerite; "besides, just look at him and observe how his eyes sparkle, in spite of his habitual dissimulation."

"Od's my life! I should think so!" murmured Henri; "he is hunting down three fine quarries to-day—France, Poland, and Navarre—not to mention the boar."

Bowing to his wife, he returned to his appointed station, and summoning one of his followers, a Béarnais by birth, whose ancestors had served his own ancestors for more than a century, and whom he usually employed as his messenger in his affairs of gallantry:

"Orthon," he said, "take this key and carry it to that cousin of Madame de Sauve's with whom you are acquainted, and who lives with his mistress at the corner of the Rue des Quatre-Fils; say that his cousin wishes to speak to him this evening; that he is to come to my room and to wait for me in case I am not there; if I am late, let him lie down on my bed meanwhile."

"There is no answer, sire?"

"None, except to tell me if you find him. The key is for him alone, you understand?"

"Yes, sire."

"Wait! don't leave me just now. Before we get clear of Paris I will call you as though to tighten my girths, you will then drop behind quite naturally, execute your commission, and join us again at Bondy."

The young man gave a gesture in sign of obedience and resumed his place.

They began their journey by the Rue

Saint-Honoré, reached the Rue Saint-Denis, and then the suburbs of the town; on arriving at the Rue Saint-Laurent the girths of the King of Navarre's horse became loose; Orthon hastened up and everything passed as had been arranged between him and his master, who continued to accompany the cavalcade along the Rue des Récollets, while the trusty servant made for the Rue du Temple.

When Henri overtook the King, Charles was engaged in such an interesting discussion with the Duc d'Alençon as to the age of the boar which had been headed off—one of the kind known as a "solitary" or "rogue"—and as to the place where he had made his lair, that he did not notice, or pretended not to have done so, that Henri had remained behind for a minute or two.

Meanwhile, Marguerite was observing from a distance their different expressions of countenance, and thought she detected a certain embarrassment in her brother's eyes whenever he looked at Henri. Madame de Nevers was giving herself up to uncontrolled merriment, for Coconnas pre-eminently cheerful that day, was close to her and indulging in innumerable droleries in order to make the ladies laugh.

As for La Mole, he had already found two opportunities of kissing Marguerite's white gold-fringed scarf without that action, performed with the dexterity customary to lovers, being observed by more than three or four persons.

Bondy was reached at a quarter past eight. The King's first care was to inquire whether the boar still held his ground.

The boar was in his lair, and the pricker who had marked him down guaranteed that he would be found there when the time came.

A repast was ready. The King drank a glass of Hungarian wine. Charles invited the ladies to be seated at table, and in his impatience went off, in order to occupy his time, to visit his kennels and perches, giving orders that his horse should not be unsaddled, inasmuch as he had never, as he said, mounted a better or stronger animal.

While the King was making his rounds the Duc de Guise arrived. He was armed rather for war than for the chase, and was accompanied by twenty or thirty gentlemen, all equipped like himself. He at once inquired where the King was and went to join him, and the two presently returned conversing together.

At exactly nine o'clock the King himself gave the signal by sounding the hark-away, and the whole company mounted their horses and started for the rendezvous.

On the way, Henri found an opportunity of speaking again to his wife.

"Well," he asked, "is there anything fresh?"

"No," answered Marguerite, "except that my brother Charles is looking at you rather strangely."

"Yes, I have noticed the fact," said Henri.

"Have you taken any precautions?"

"I have my coat of mail on, and I carry at my side a good Spanish hunting knife, sharp as a razor, pointed as a needle, that I can drive through a pile of doubloons."

"God preserve you, then!" said Marguerite.

The pricker who was guiding the cavalcade made a sign; they had arrived at the boar's lair.

CHAPTER XXX

MAUREVEL.

WHILE all this cavalcade, gay and careless, to all appearance at least, was sweeping like a golden whirlwind along the road to Bondy, Catherine, after rolling up the precious document to which King Charles had just appended his signature, was admitting to her room the man to whom her captain of the guard had, a few days earlier, taken a letter addressed to the Rue de Cerisaie, near the Arsenal.

A broad patch of plaster, like a mortuary seal, concealed one of this man's eyes, leaving only the other eye visible, and giving a glimpse of a vulture-like nose between two prominent cheek-bones, while a greyish beard covered the lower part of his face. He wore at his side, though it was not customary for people summoned to the Court to do so, a long sword, an old-fashioned, clumsy weapon, with a basket hilt. One of his hands, hidden beneath his cloak, tightly grasped the handle of a long dagger.

"Ah! here you are, sir," said the Queen, seating herself; "you know that I promised you, after St. Bartholomew's Day, when you rendered us such signal service, not to leave you without employment. An opportunity presents itself, or rather, I have created the opportunity, so you must thank me."

"Madame, I humbly thank your Majesty," said the man with the black bandage, with a caution at once servile and insolent.

"A fine opportunity, sir, such as will not occur twice in your life, so make the most of it."

"I am waiting, Madame; only, I fear that after such a preamble . . ."

"The commission is one of violence? Are not those just the commissions of which those who desire to advance their fortunes are fond? The one of which I am speaking would be envied by the Tavannes and by the Guises themselves."

"Ah! Madame, be it what it may, rest assured that I am at your Majesty's commands."

"In that case, read," said Catherine. And she handed him the parchment. The man glanced at the document and turned pale.

"What!" he cried, "an order to arrest the King of Navarre!"

"Well! what is there so extraordinary in that?"

"But a King, Madame! In truth I fear that my position is not high enough."

"The confidence I repose in you makes you the highest gentleman in my Court, Monsieur de Maurevel," said Catherine.

"I thank your Majesty," said the assassin, with such emotion that he appeared to hesitate.

"You will obey then?"

"Is it not my duty to do so, if your Majesty orders it?"

"Yes, I order it."

"Then I will obey."

"How shall you set about it?"

"Why, Madame, I hardly know, and I would fain be directed by your Majesty."

"You dread the disturbance?"

"I confess it."

"Take a dozen trusty men, more if necessary."

"I understand, of course. Your Majesty allows me to take my precautions, and I am grateful; but where shall I seize the King of Navarre?"

"In any place that you prefer."

"In a place which, by the very augustness of its character, protects me, if that be possible."

"Yes, I understand you, in one of the royal palaces; what should you say to the Louvre, for instance?"

"Oh! if your Majesty permits it, it would be a great favour."

"Then you shall arrest him in the Louvre."

"In what part of the palace?"

"In his own chamber."

Maurevel bowed.

"And when, Madame?"

"This evening, or rather, to-night."

"Very well, Madame. Now will your Majesty deign to instruct me on one point?"

"What is it?"

"On the respect due to his rank."

"Respect! . . . rank! . . ." said Catherine. "Are you ignorant, then, sir, that the King of France owes no respect to any person whatsoever in his kingdom, since he recognises no one whose rank is equal to his own?"

Maurevel bowed again.

"There is a point, however, which I must urge, if your Majesty permits."

"I permit it, sir."

"If the King should dispute the authenticity of the order; it is not likely, but still."

"On the contrary, sir, it is certain."

"That he will dispute it?"

"Undoubtedly so."

"And, consequently, refuse to obey?"

"I fear so."

"And make resistance?"

"It is probable."

"Oh! the devil!" said Maurevel; "and in that case . . ."

"In what case?" said Catherine, looking fixedly at him.

"In case he should resist, what must I do?"

"What do you usually do, Monsieur de Maurevel, when you are charged with an order from the King—when, that is to say, you represent the King—and anyone offers resistance?"

"Why, Madame, when I am honoured with such an order, and that order concerns a simple gentleman, I kill him."

"I have told you, sir," replied Catherine, "and I should not have thought you could have forgotten it already, that the King of France recognises no rank within his kingdom; that is to say, that the King of France alone is King, and that compared with him the highest in the land are but simple gentlemen."

Maurevel grew more pale, for he was beginning to understand.

"Oh!" said he, "to kill the King of Navarre? . . ."

"But who tells you to kill him? Where is the order to kill him? The King wants him brought to the Bastille, that is all that the order contains. If he allows himself to be seized, well and

good; but as he will not do so, but will resist and try to kill you . . ."

Maurevel turned paler still.

"You will defend yourself. It is not to be expected that a brave man like yourself will allow himself to be killed without defending himself; and in doing so, why, if anything happens, it must. You understand, do you not?"

"Yes, Madame, but still . . ."

"I see; you want that after the words:—*Order to arrest*, I should write: *dead or alive*?"

"I confess, Madame, that it would remove my scruples."

"Well, I suppose I must do it, since you think the commission cannot be executed in any other way."

And Catherine, with a shrug of her shoulders, unrolled the parchment with one hand and wrote with the other the words: *dead or alive*.

"There," she said, "do you think the order sufficiently in form now?"

"Yes, Madame," answered Maurevel, "but I beg your Majesty to leave to me the entire arrangement of the enterprise."

"In what way do the instructions I have given you impede its execution?"

"Your Majesty told me to take twelve men?"

"Yes; to make more certain . . ."

"Well, I ask permission to take only six."

"Why so?"

"Because, Madame, should any accident happen to the Prince, as is quite likely, six men will more easily be excused for fearing lest the prisoner should escape; while, on the other hand, nobody would excuse a body of twelve guards for not allowing half of their number to be slain before laying violent hands on his Majesty."

"Upon my faith, a fine Majesty that does not possess a kingdom!"

"Madame," said Maurevel, "it is not the kingdom that makes the king, but his birth."

"Well, then, do as you please," said Catherine. "Only, I should tell you that I do not wish you to quit the Louvre."

"But, Madame, I must collect my men?"

"You, surely, have a sergeant of some sort to whom you can entrust that task?"

"I have my lackey, who not only is a trusty knave, but who has sometimes aided me in enterprises of this kind."

"Send for him, and arrange matters with him. You know the King's Armoury, do you not? Well, breakfast will be served for you there, and you will

give your orders there. The atmosphere of the place will restore your shaken nerve. When my son returns from hunting, you will go into my oratory, and there await the time."

"But how are we to enter his chamber? The King has, no doubt, some suspicion, and will lock his door on the inside."

"I have duplicate keys of all the doors," said Catherine, "and the bolts have been removed from Henri's door. Good-bye, Monsieur de Maurevel, I shall see you anon. I will tell them to conduct you to the King's Armoury. Ah! by the bye, let me remind you that a king's orders must be executed at all costs—that no excuse is permissible—that a failure, nay, even an incomplete success, would compromise the King's honour. The affair is serious."

And Catherine, without leaving Maurevel time to reply, summoned M. de Nancey, captain of the guard, and bade him conduct Maurevel to the King's Armoury.

"Od's death!" said Maurevel, as he followed his guide, "I am rising in the scale of assassinations—from a simple gentleman to a captain, from a captain to an admiral, from an admiral to a King without a crown. Who knows but I shall one day reach a crowned monarch?"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BOAR HUNT

THE pricker, who had headed off the boar, and had assured the King that the animal had not quitted covert, was not mistaken. The blood-hound was no sooner put upon the scent than he plunged into the underwood, and from a dense clump of thorns routed out the boar, which, as the huntsman had gathered from its tracks, was a "solitary," or "rogue," which means that he was a beast of the largest size and most formidable courage.

The boar dashed away in a straight line, and crossed the road at fifty yards from the King, followed only by the blood-hound which had started him. A first relay of hounds was immediately uncoupled, and some ten couples dashed off in pursuit.

Charles was passionately fond of the chase. Scarcely had the animal crossed the road when he made after it, sounding the view-halloa, and followed by the Duc d'Alençon and Henri, whom Marguerite had warned by a gesture not to leave the King's side.

All the other sportsmen followed the King. At the period of this story, the Royal forests were far from being, as they are at the present day, great parks intersected by drives practicable for wheeled vehicles. Their cultivation with an eye to profit was then all but undreamt of. The Kings of France had not as yet conceived the idea of turning themselves into traders, and of dividing and subdividing their woods with a view to the felling of timber. The trees planted, not by expert foresters, but by the hand of God, who scatters the seed at the caprice of the wind, were not arranged in quincunxes, but grew in wild luxuriance, as they still do to-day in the virgin forests of America. In short, a forest at this period was a harbour affording shelter to the boar, the stag, the wolf, and the robber; and merely some dozen paths, starting from a central point, radiated across the Forest of Bondy, which was enclosed by a circular road just as the spokes of a wheel are surrounded by the circumference. To push the comparison a step further, the hub of the wheel would pretty accurately represent the single cross-way at the centre of the wood, to which the scattered hunters rallied in order to resume at a fresh point the chase of which they had temporarily lost touch.

At the end of a quarter of an hour there occurred what always happens in such cases; obstacles almost insurmountable had impeded the course of the hunters, the voices of the hounds had died away in the distance, and the King himself had returned to the cross-ways, cursing and swearing as was his wont.

"Well! d'Alençon, well! Henriot," said he, "here you are, egod! as cool and calm as nuns following their abbess. I don't call that proper sport, look you. You, d'Alençon, look as if you had come out of a band-box, and you are so perfumed that if you get between the hounds and the boar you will very likely foil the scent. And you, Henriot, where is your spear or your arquebus, eh?"

"Sire," said Henri, "what is the good of an arquebus? I know that your Majesty likes to shoot the animal yourself when the hounds bring him to bay. As for the spear, I am not very skilful in the use of that weapon, which is not employed in our mountains, where we hunt the bear with a dagger and nothing else."

"Zounds! Henri, when you get back to your Pyrenees you will have to send me a waggon-load of bears, for that hand-to-hand struggle with an animal which may strangle you must be fine sport. Hark! I think I hear the hounds. No, I am mistaken."

The King seized his horn and sounded a flourish. Several horns replied to him in similar strains. Suddenly a huntsman appeared, who blew a different note.

"There he goes! there he goes!" shouted the King.

And he dashed off at full gallop, followed by all the riders who had rallied to his side.

The huntsman had not been mistaken. As the King advanced, one heard more and more distinctly the music of the pack, which consisted now of more than sixty hounds, for all the relays placed at the spots where the boar had passed had been successively released. The King saw the boar pass for the second time, and, taking advantage of a stretch of full-grown trees, where there was no underwood, rode off in pursuit of him, blowing his horn with might and main.

The Princess kept up with him for some time, but the King was so well mounted, and in his excitement climbed such precipitous ascents, and made his way through such dense undergrowth, that the ladies first of all, and then the Duc de Guise and his gentlemen, together with the two Princes, were obliged to fall behind. Tavannes kept up with him for some time longer, but at last he, too, had to give way.

Accordingly, the whole company, with the exception of Charles and a few huntsmen, who, stimulated by the promise of reward, were determined to keep up with the King, presently found themselves back again in the neighbourhood of the cross-ways.

The two princes were side by side in a long path, while the Duc de Guise and his gentlemen had halted within a hundred yards of them. At the central opening were the ladies.

"Might not one almost suppose," said the Duc d'Alençon to Henri, indicating by a glance the Duc de Guise, "that that man yonder, with his escort clad in steel, was the real king? We poor princes are not even honoured by a glance from him."

"Why should he treat us with more respect than our own relations treat us?"

answered Henri. "Are not you and I practically prisoners at the Court of France, as hostages of our Party?"

Duc François started at these words, and looked at Henri as though to challenge him to a fuller explanation; but Henry had launched out further than was his wont, and relapsed into silence.

"What do you mean, Henri?" asked the Duke, visibly annoyed that his brother-in-law, by declining to follow up his remark, left it to himself to begin the explanation.

"I say, brother," answered Henri, "that these men so fully armed, and who appear to have been instructed not to let us out of their sight, have all the appearance of guards who would take it upon themselves to prevent two persons from escaping."

"Escaping, how do you mean?" asked d'Alençon, with an admirably simulated air of innocent surprise.

"You have a fine jennet there, François," said Henri, following up his thought, while appearing to turn the conversation. "I am certain that he could do seven leagues an hour, and be twenty leagues from here by noon. Doesn't that nice road across there tempt you, François? For my part, I am longing to use my spurs."

François made no reply but turned red and pale successively; then he stretched his ear as though listening to the sound of the chase.

"The news from Poland has had its effect," thought Henri, "and my dear brother-in-law has his plan; he would like me to escape, but I will not escape by myself."

This reflection had hardly occurred to him, when several new converts, who had returned to the Court in the last two or three months, galloped up and greeted the two Princes with engaging smiles.

The Duc d'Alençon, thus challenged by the overtures made to him by Henri, had but to speak a word or make a sign, and it was clear that these thirty or forty horsemen, who had gathered round them at this moment as though to offer opposition to the horsemen of M. de Guise, would have aided their escape, but the Duke turned his head away, and putting his horn to his mouth, sounded the rally.

The new-comers, however, as though believing that the Duke's hesitation was due to the presence of the Guisards, had gradually slipped in between the latter and the two Princes, drawing themselves

up in échelon with a strategic skill which indicated their familiarity with military tactics. Otherwise, to reach the Duc d'Alençon and the King of Navarre, they would have been obliged to cross in front of them, whereas, in consequence of their manœuvre, the road in front of the two Princes lay perfectly open as far as one could see.

Suddenly, between the trees, at ten paces from the King of Navarre, there appeared another gentleman whom the two Princes had not yet seen. Henri was trying to surmise who he might be, when the gentleman, raising his hat, introduced himself to Henri as the Vicomte de Turenne, one of the leaders of the Protestant Party who was thought to be in Poitou.

The Vicomte even hazarded a gesture which clearly implied: "Are you coming?"

Henri, however, after an inquiring glance at the impassive countenance and expressionless eye of the Duc d'Alençon, twisted his head about two or three times, as though something inside the collar of his doublet was causing him discomfort.

This betokened an answer in the negative. The Vicomte understood the signal, rode away from the Princes, and disappeared into the wood.

At the same instant the hounds were heard approaching, the boar was seen crossing at the end of the path; close on his heels flew the pack, followed by Charles, hatless, and blowing his horn so as almost to burst his lungs; three or four of the huntsmen still kept up with him. Tavannes had disappeared.

"The King!" cried the Duc d'Alençon, dashing after him.

Henri, reassured by the presence of his friends, motioned to them not to leave him, and advanced towards the ladies.

"Well?" said Marguerite, riding a few steps to meet him.

"Well! Madame," said Henri, "we are chasing the boar."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, the wind has changed since yesterday morning; but I think I predicted to you that such would be the case."

"These changes of wind are bad for the chase, are they not, sir?" asked Marguerite.

"Yes," said Henri; "they often upset all the arrangements made, and some other plan has to be formed."

At this moment the baying of the pack was heard coming rapidly nearer, and a kind of snorting breathing warned the

hunters to be on their guard. All raised their heads and listened eagerly.

Almost instantly the boar dashed out, and, instead of plunging again into the wood, headed straight along the path towards the opening in which stood the ladies, the gentlemen who were in attendance on them, and the hunters who had been thrown out in the chase.

Close on the heels of the boar came thirty or forty of the gamest hounds; then, about twenty yards behind them, Charles, without hat or cloak, his clothes all torn by brambles, his face and hands covered with blood. Only one or two huntsmen now remained with him.

The King, when he was not blowing the horn, was encouraging his hounds; for him the rest of the world had ceased to exist. Had his steed failed him, he would have cried, like Richard the Third: "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!"

But the horse seemed as eager as his master: his hoofs hardly touched the ground, his nostrils breathed flames

"*Hallali, hallali!*" shouted the King, as he passed, and pressed his horn to his bleeding lips.

A few paces behind him came the Duc d'Alençon and two huntsmen; the horses of the rest had either given up or were lost.

Everyone started on the track, for it was evident that the boar would soon be brought to bay. Scarcely ten minutes, indeed, had elapsed before the boar quitted the ride and plunged into the wood; on reaching a glade, however, he turned his back to a rock and faced the hounds.

At the shouts of Charles everyone hurried to the spot.

The most interesting moment of the chase had arrived. The boar appeared determined to offer a resolute defence; the hounds, excited by a pursuit which had lasted for more than three hours, attacked him with a fury which made the King redouble his shouts and oaths.

All the sportsmen ranged themselves in a circle, the King a little in front, having close behind him the Duc d'Alençon, who was armed with an arquebus, and Henri, who had merely his hunting-knife.

The Duc d'Alençon detached his arquebus from the crook and lighted the match. Henri loosened the knife in its sheath.

The Duc de Guise, who was somewhat contemptuous of everything connected

with the chase, remained at some distance with all his attendants.

The little band of ladies grouped together formed a sort of appendage to the company of the Duc de Guise. All the lovers of the chase kept their eyes fixed on the boar in anxious expectation.

A short distance apart stood a huntsman, holding in with might and main the King's two mastiffs, clad in their coats of mail, which, barking and bounding so violently that you would have thought every moment they must break their chains, were waiting for the moment to seize the boar by the ears.

The animal displayed extraordinary courage; attacked by forty hounds at once, surrounding him like a roaring tide, covering him like a striped carpet, endeavouring to grasp his wrinkled skin with its bristly hair, at each movement of his tusk he hurled to the distance of ten feet a hound, which fell to the ground ripped up, and immediately, with protruding entrails, rushed into the fray again, while Charles, his hair stiff and his eyes gleaming, leaning over the neck of his streaming horse, sounded a fierce death-halloo. In less than ten minutes twenty of the hounds were disabled.

"The mastiffs! the mastiffs!" shouted Charles.

At this cry, the huntsman opened the swivels of the slips, and the two dogs rushed into the midst of the fray, overturning all the hounds, and with their coats of mail ploughing their road through to the boar, which they seized each by an ear. The boar, feeling himself held, ground his teeth with rage and pain.

"Bravo! Durendent! Bravo! Risque-tout!" shouted Charles. "Hold on, dogs! A spear! a spear!"

"Won't you have my arquebus?" said the Duc d'Alençon.

"No, no," cried the King, "there is no fun in that; he won't feel the bullet, but he will the spear. A spear! a spear!"

A boar-spear, toughened in the furnace and armed with an iron point, was handed to the King.

"Have a care, brother!" cried Marguerite.

"Don't miss your stroke, sire!" cried the Duchesse de Nevers; "give the brute a good one!"

"Never fear, Duchess!" said Charles.

And drawing back the spear, he launched it at the boar, which, held by

two dogs, could not evade the thrust. At the sight, however, of the gleaming steel, he sprang to one side, and the weapon, instead of piercing his chest, grazed his shoulder and flattened its point against the rock.

"Ten thousand devils!" shouted the King, "I have missed: a spear! a spear!"

A huntsman stepped forward to hand him another. But at that instant the boar, as though anticipating the fate that awaited him and trying to avoid it, wrenched his mangled ears from the dogs' teeth, and with blood-shot eyes, bristling, hideous, snorting like the bellows of a forge, and grinding his teeth together, lowered his head, and charged the King's horse.

Charles was too good a sportsman not to have foreseen this attack. He reined in his horse, which reared; but he had pulled him so sharply that the animal, either owing to the pressure on the bit or, perhaps, in mere terror, fell over backwards.

The spectators, one and all, uttered a cry of terror; the horse had fallen and the King's thigh was wedged beneath it.

"Your hand, sire, give me your hand," said Henri.

The King let go the bridle, grasped the saddle with the left hand, endeavouring with the right to draw his hunting-knife; but the knife, crushed under the weight of his body, refused to leave the sheath.

"The boar! the boar!" cried Charles. "Help, d'Alençon, help!"

The horse, however, recovering himself, gave a spring, as though he realised the peril his master was in, and had already succeeded in rising on his fore legs, when Henri saw François turn frightfully pale at his brother's appeal for help, and raise his arquebus to his shoulder; the bullet, however, instead of striking the boar, which was not more than six feet from the King, broke the horse's leg, and it fell back, its head resting on the ground. At the same moment the boar ripped up the King's boot.

"Oh!" murmured d'Alençon, with white lips, "I verily believe the Duc d'Anjou is King of France, and I am King of Poland."

The boar was, indeed, actually lacerating the King's thigh, when Charles perceived an arm raised above him and saw the gleam of a sharp blade plunging up to the handle in the hollow of the boar's shoulder, while a steel-gloved hand thrust aside the steaming snout on the point of burying itself in his thigh.

Charles, who, released by his horse's

shifting, had succeeded in extricating his leg, got up slowly, and, seeing the blood streaming over him, turned as pale as a corpse.

"Sire," said Henri, who, still on his knees, was holding the boar pierced to the heart, "sire, it is nothing: I guarded off his tusks, and your Majesty is not wounded."

He rose from his knees, dropping the knife, and the boar fell to the ground, the blood pouring from its throat even more copiously than from the wound.

Charles, surrounded by all this breathless assembly, whose cries of terror might well have shaken the strongest nerves, for a moment was on the point of falling beside the dying beast. But he recovered himself, and turning to the King of Navarre, grasped his hand with a glance in which shone the first ray of feeling that had quickened the pulses of his heart for four and twenty years.

"Thank you, Henriot," he said

"My poor brother!" cried d'Alençon, coming up to Charles.

"Ah! it is you, d'Alençon!" said the King. "Well! you famous shot, what became of your bullet?"

"It must have flattened itself against the boar," said the Duke

"Why! good Heavens!" said Henri, with admirably-feigned surprise, "see, François, your bullet has broken the leg of his Majesty's horse; how very strange."

"Eh! is that true?" said the King.

"It may be so," said the Duke, in confusion; "my hand trembled so."

"The fact is that, for a clever marksman, you made a very remarkable shot," said Charles, with a frown. "Thank you once again, Henriot. Gentlemen," continued the King, "we will return to Paris; I have had enough of this."

Marguerite came forward to congratulate Henri.

"Ah! by my troth, yes, Margot," said Charles, "compliment him, and sincerely too, for but for him the King of France would now be styled Henri III."

"Alas! Madame," said the Béarnais, "the Duc d'Anjou, who is already hostile to me, will bear me a grudge more than ever. But what would you have? a man must do what he can; ask the Duc d'Alençon if is not so."

And stooping down, he drew his hunting-knife from beneath the carcase of the boar, and plunged it two or three times into the ground to clean it from the blood.

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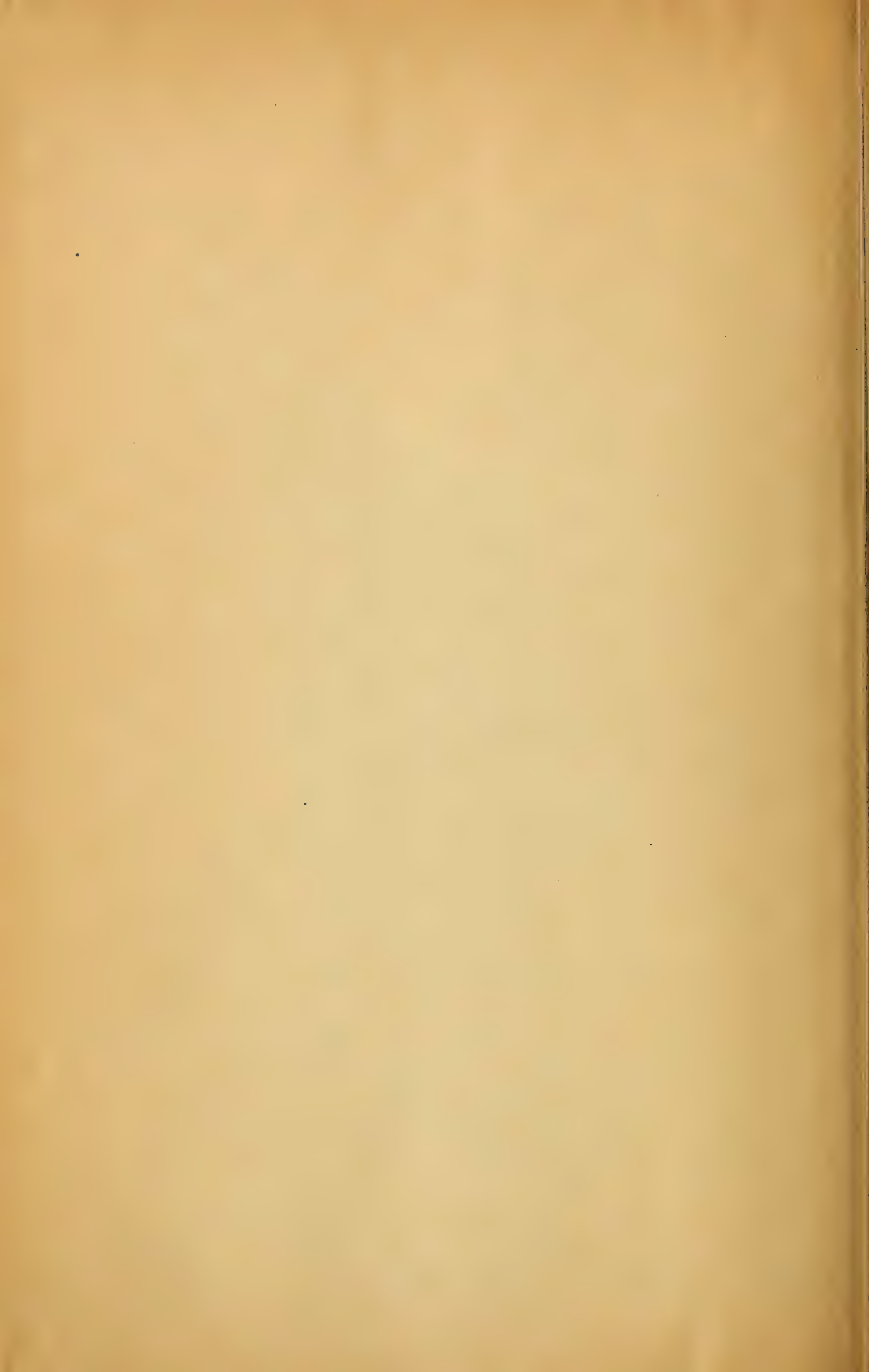
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